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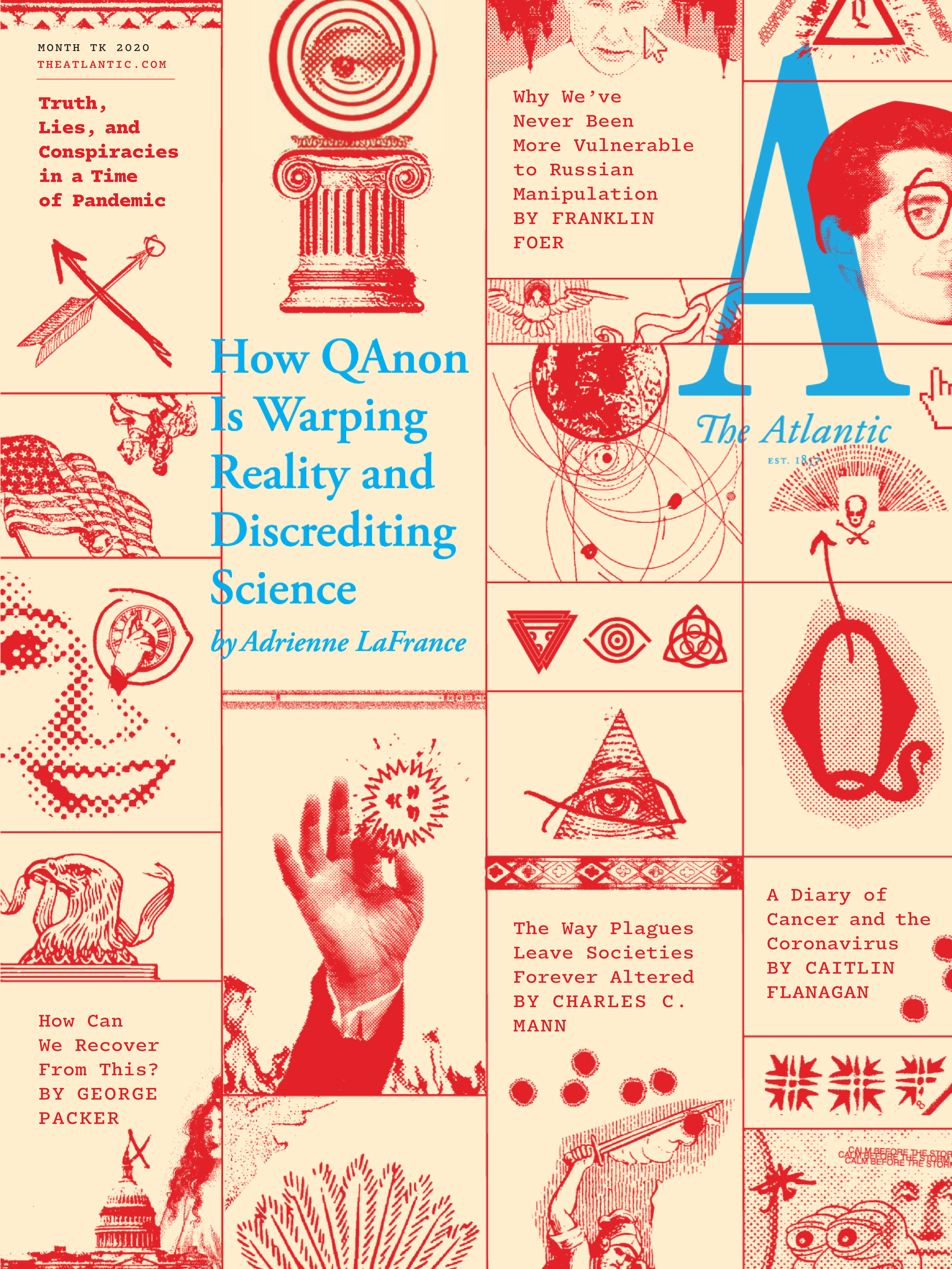

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Truth, Lies, and Conspiracies in a Time of Pandemic

How QAnon Is Warping Reality and Discrediting Science

by Adrienne LaFrance

Why We've Never Been More Vulnerable to Russian Manipulation
BY FRANKLIN FOER

The Atlantic
EST. 1857

The Way Plagues Leave Societies Forever Altered
BY CHARLES C. MANN

A Diary of Cancer and the Coronavirus
BY CAITLIN FLANAGAN

How Can We Recover From This?
BY GEORGE PACKER

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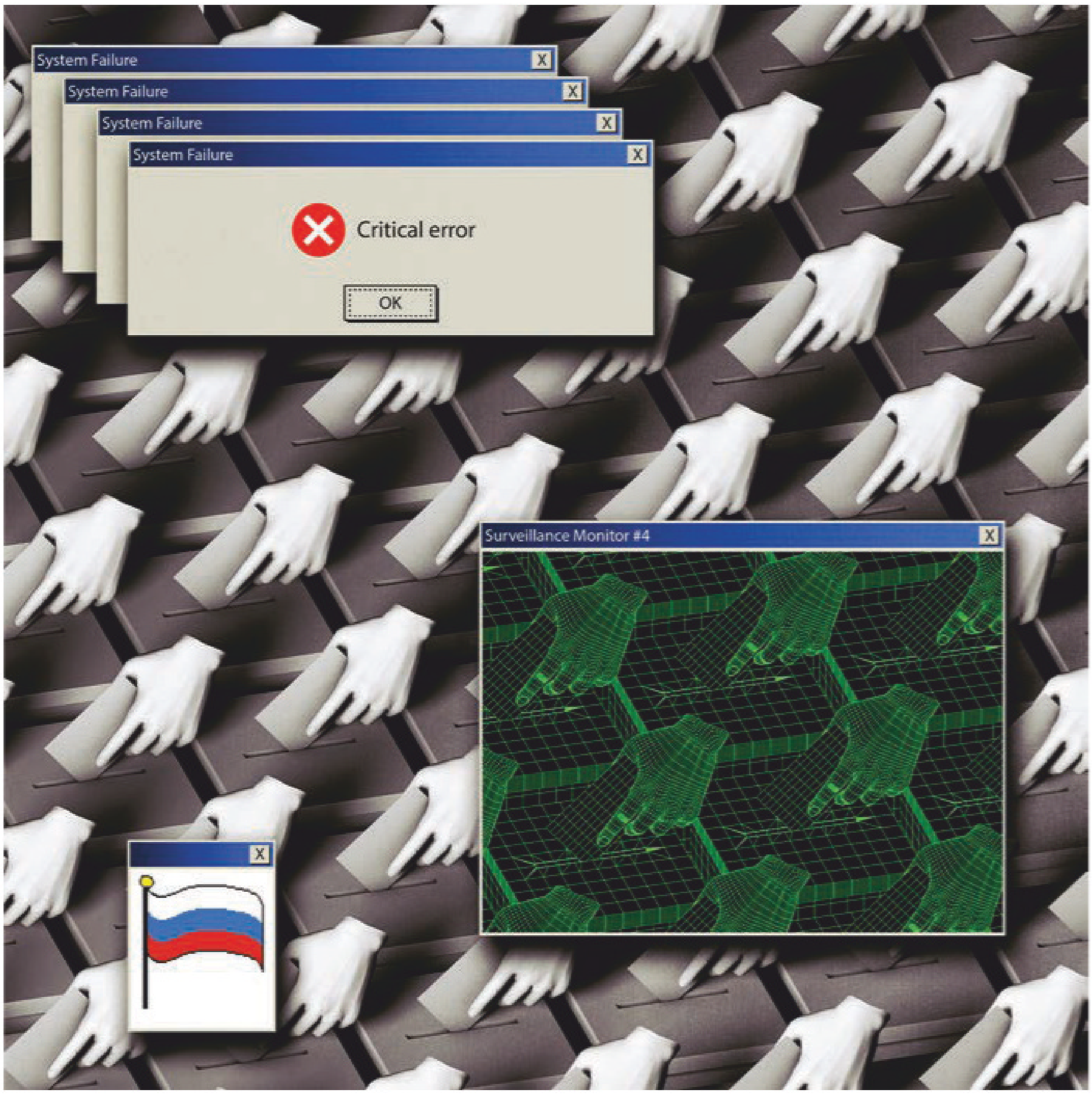

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OLIVER MUNDAY AND
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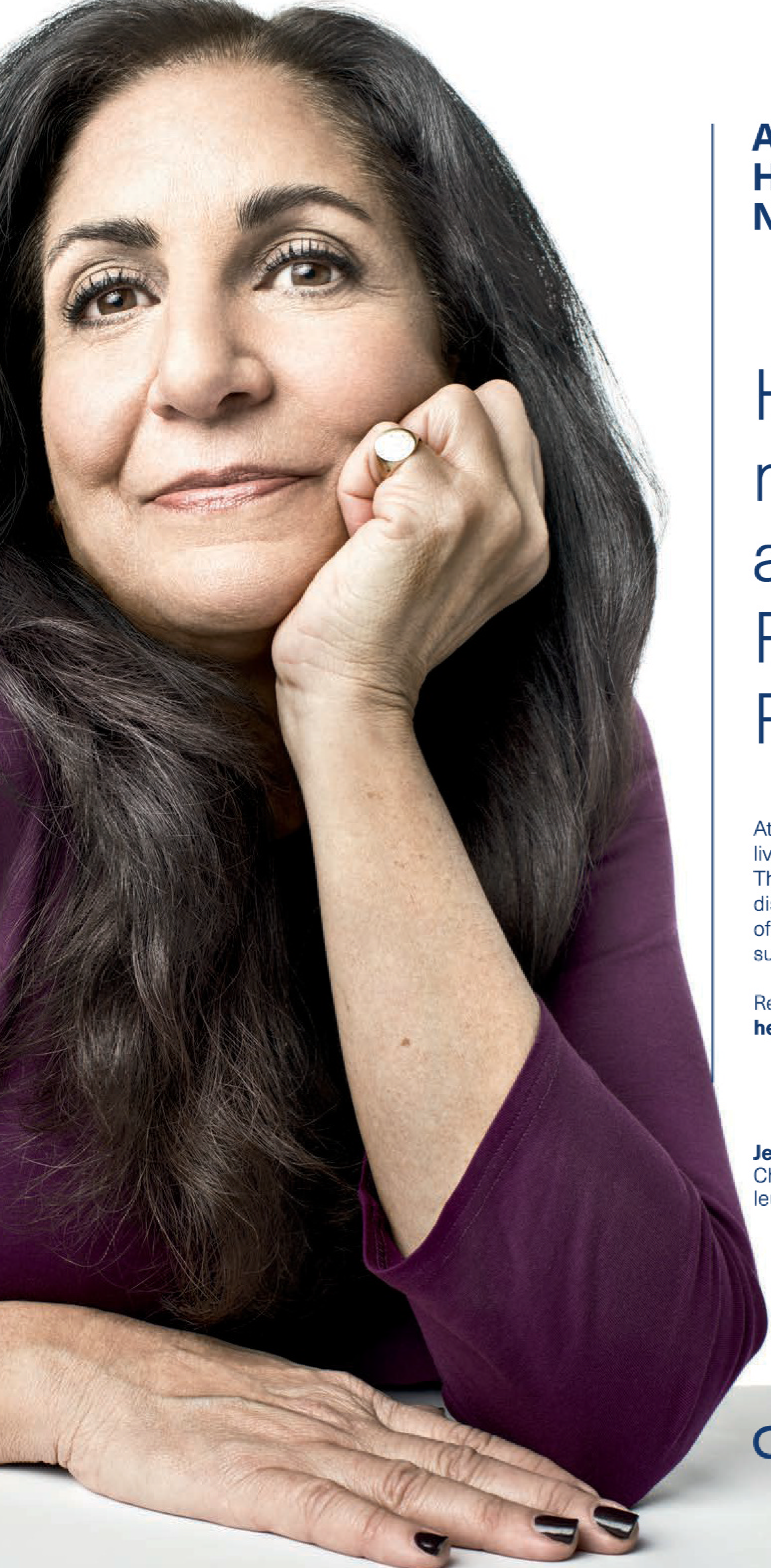

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Behind the Cover: The June cover story, Adrienne LaFrance's definitive look at the conspiratorial group QAnon, provides a menacing lens through which to view the surreal current moment. To illustrate the disparate fringe views held by QAnon's adherents, we constructed a latticework of cryptic imagery, finding spots to include motifs from several other stories in the issue as well.

— Oliver Munday, *Senior Art Director*
Arsh Raziuddin, *Associate Art Director*

How to Destroy a Government

The president is winning his war on American institutions, George Packer wrote in April.

Letters

On the fifth night of my coronavirus quarantine, I sat and read "How to Destroy a Government" in one sitting. Although my attention had been scattered all week, bouncing between worrying about suddenly teaching an online class and worrying about getting sick, I could not peel my eyes off this article. From the horrifying tangle of presidential misdeeds, it extracts the key narrative strands, illuminating Donald Trump's more sinister, power-addicted tendencies. Reading it in the midst of such gross presidential incompetence felt particularly poignant. Excising him from his post, like the tumor that he is, is the only chance we have to rehabilitate the institutions he and his cronies have so profoundly damaged.

Wren Romero
Chicago, Ill.

My students and most of my colleagues are of the "Bernie or bust" ideology, and are disinclined to vote for Joe Biden. As a progressive, I am dismayed by the Biden choice—however, another term of Trumpism will be the end of our flawed democracy. I hope to be able to use some of the facts in this well-researched article to sway others. Our greatest weakness as a species is our inability to see beyond a very short time frame.

Naomi Rachel
Boulder, Colo.

George Packer's analysis is excellent, but I disagree with his suggestion that the Framers left us exposed to Trumpian demagoguery. After some useful debate, they left us a potentially effective impeachment mechanism; the larger problem resides in that segment of the population with an affinity for authoritarian governance, which elevates adherence to moral absolutes above the essential democratic process of negotiation and compromise. Thomas Paine recognized that authentic liberty requires a continuing civil discourse, and that discourse can be maintained only by broad popular support for the rule of law.

Whether that support is sufficiently strong is open to question: William Barr has not yet been impeached, and the partisanship of the Supreme Court—self-evident in *Bush v. Gore*, *Citizens United v. FEC*, and *Shelby County v. Holder*—has led to episodic public protests but, as yet, no significant turnover in the Senate. When the rule of law is profoundly compromised in multiple organs of government, we are confronting what Benjamin Franklin warned of: a public so corrupted that it is fit to be governed only by a despot.

Erica Newland, one of the dedicated civil servants whom Packer interviewed, observed that corruption "doesn't have to be pay-to-play to be corrupt. It's a departure from the oath." She was referring to the pervasive lack of respect shown to the departments of government by the president and his familiars, which has its sad counterpart in public attitudes.

Stan Wiggins
Bethesda, Md.

COMMONS

DISCUSSION
&
DEBATE

George Packer writes: "Employees of the executive branch work for the president, and a central requirement of their jobs is to carry out the president's policies. If they can't do so in good conscience, then they should leave."

This is an erroneous view, in my opinion. The president does not pay the salaries of the public service; the state does, with moneys taxed from citizens. Public servants owe their duty of loyal service to the state.

Mr. Packer's statement perpetuates a confusion that enables Trump's misfeasance. Let's be clear on who employs public servants and to whom they owe their duty.

Edgar H. Schmidt
Val-des-Monts, Quebec

I confess, I could not read this entire article. I just don't have the stomach for it. But it reminds me strongly of a passage in William Penn's "Frame of Government of Pennsylvania," which says:

> Governments, like clocks, go from the motion men give them, and as governments are made and moved by men, so by them they are ruined too. Wherefore governments rather depend upon men, than men upon governments. Let men be good, and the government cannot be bad; if it be ill, they will cure it. But, if men be bad, let the government be never so good, they will endeavor to warp and spoil it to their turn.

That pretty well sums up the current condition of our country, as darkly foreseen by Penn some 340 years ago.

John Day
Santa Barbara, Calif.

I had to read George Packer's account of the president's successful dismantling of our republic's institutions in fits and starts. It was just too much to digest in a single sitting. As the magazine lay open for several days, I approached it like a bad car accident—not wanting to look, but unable to pass it without reading a paragraph or two.

Kent Trebilcox
Amherst, Va.

To respond to *Atlantic* articles or submit author questions to The Commons, please email letters@theatlantic.com. Include your full name, city, and state.

THE FACTS

What we learned fact-checking this issue

In her exploration of QAnon, whose followers seek to thwart the "cabal" of depraved elites they believe is destroying America, Adrienne LaFrance writes that the group's adherents reject logic and reason. In March, for example, their anonymous leader, Q, promoted the claim that "the CHINA Virus" was engineered in a Wuhan lab and was being deployed as a bioweapon to stymie President Donald Trump's chances of reelection. The idea that the Chinese may have created the virus had already made the rounds—and had been widely debunked—but Q helped give the theory new life.

As Franklin Foer notes in his feature about Russian sabotage of American elections, also in this issue, conspiracy theories about disease were once the province of Soviets seeking to sow division in America. In 1983, the KGB planted a fake letter in a small New Delhi newspaper, in which an unnamed but supposedly "well-known American scientist" speculated that AIDS had been developed by the Pentagon in a Fort Detrick lab. By 1987, the idea had spread to more than 50 countries, and was discussed on the *CBS Evening News*. The false claim traveled slowly by today's standards, but it proved enduring: In 2005, Kanye West rapped, "And I know the government administered AIDS," and a small 2006 study found that more than one in five Americans believed this to be true.

— Stephanie Hayes,
Deputy Research Chief
Jack Segelstein,
Assistant Editor

A Note From the Editors

We're especially pleased to bring you this issue of *The Atlantic*, which to our knowledge is the first in our 163-year history that was designed, edited, fact-checked, and otherwise produced on an entirely remote basis. We think the issue is full of great stories from cover to cover, and we hope you enjoy it.

Much of normal life has gone on hiatus recently. We have worked hard to plan for various contingencies related to home delivery, but maybe you're at a different address than usual, or you want to read more of *The Atlantic* between print issues. If that's the case, we want to remind you that you can always access our journalism at **TheAtlantic.com.** If you're a subscriber, visit TheAtlantic.com/Register to find out how to log in and take full advantage of your benefits. If you're not, and would like to support vital journalism in these uncertain times, join us at TheAtlantic.com/June20. And if you need assistance, please visit our help center at Support.TheAtlantic.com.

In addition to digital versions of all the articles that appear in our print magazine, you'll find on our website some of the world's best daily and weekly coverage of the coronavirus pandemic and the response to it, plus much more.

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Imagine the world post-pandemic.

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DISPATCHES

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UNDERLYING CONDITIONS

In America, the coronavirus has revealed a sick and unequal society incapable of self-government.

BY GEORGE PACKER

When the virus came here, it found a country with serious underlying conditions, and it exploited them ruthlessly. Chronic ills—a corrupt political class, a sclerotic bureaucracy, a heartless economy, a divided and distracted public—had gone untreated for years. We had learned to live, uncomfortably, with the symptoms. It took the scale and intimacy of a pandemic to expose their severity—to shock Americans with the recognition that we are in the high-risk category.

The crisis demanded a response that was swift, rational, and collective. The United States reacted instead like Pakistan or Belarus—like a country with shoddy infrastructure and a dysfunctional government whose leaders were too corrupt or stupid to head off mass suffering. The administration squandered two irretrievable months to prepare. From the president came willful blindness, scapegoating, boasts, and lies. From his mouthpieces, conspiracy theories and miracle cures. A few senators and corporate executives acted quickly—not to prevent the coming disaster, but to profit from it. When a government doctor tried to warn the public of the danger, the White House took the mic and politicized the message.

Every morning in the endless month of March, Americans woke up to find themselves citizens of a failed state. With no national plan—no coherent instructions at all—families, schools, and offices were left to decide on their own whether to shut down and take shelter. When test kits, masks, gowns, and ventilators were found to be in desperately short supply, governors pleaded for them from the White House, which stalled, then called on private enterprise, which couldn't deliver. States and cities were forced into bidding wars that left them prey to price gouging and corporate profiteering. Civilians took out their sewing machines to try to keep ill-equipped hospital workers healthy and their patients alive. Russia, Taiwan, and the United Nations sent humanitarian aid to the world's richest power—a beggar nation in utter chaos.

Donald Trump saw the crisis almost entirely in personal and political terms. Fearing for his reelection, he declared the coronavirus pandemic a war, and himself a wartime president. But the leader he brings to mind is Marshal Philippe Pétain, the French general who, in 1940, signed an armistice with Germany after its rout of French defenses, then formed the pro-Nazi Vichy regime. Like Pétain, Trump collaborated with the invader and abandoned his country to a prolonged disaster. And, like France in 1940, America in 2020 has stunned itself with a collapse that's larger and deeper than one miserable leader. Some future autopsy of the pandemic might be called *Strange Defeat*, after the historian and Resistance fighter Marc Bloch's contemporaneous study of the fall of France. Despite countless examples around the U.S. of individual courage and sacrifice, the failure is national. And it should force a question that most Americans have never had to ask: Do we trust our leaders and one another enough to summon a collective response to a mortal threat? Are we still capable of self-government?

This is the third major crisis of the short 21st century. The first, on September 11, 2001, came when Americans were still living mentally in the previous century, and the memory of depression, world war, and cold war remained strong. On that day, people in the rural heartland did not see New York as an alien stew of immigrants and liberals that deserved its fate, but as a great American city that had taken a hit for the whole country. Firefighters from Indiana drove 800 miles to help the rescue effort at Ground Zero. Our civic reflex was to mourn and mobilize together.

Partisan politics and terrible policies, especially the Iraq War, erased the sense of national unity and fed a bitterness toward the political class that never really faded. The second crisis, in 2008, intensified it. At the top, the financial crash could almost be considered a success. Congress passed a bipartisan bailout bill that saved the financial system. Outgoing Bush-administration officials cooperated with incoming Obama-administration officials. The experts at the Federal Reserve and the Treasury Department used monetary and fiscal policy to prevent a second Great Depression. Leading bankers were shamed but not prosecuted; most of them kept their fortunes and some their jobs. Before long they were back in business. A Wall Street trader told me that the financial crisis had been a "speed bump."

EVERY MORNING IN THE ENDLESS MONTH OF MARCH, AMERICANS WOKE UP TO FIND THEMSELVES CITIZENS OF A FAILED STATE.

All of the lasting pain was felt in the middle and at the bottom, by Americans who had taken on debt and lost their jobs, homes, and retirement savings. Many of them never recovered, and young people who came of age in the Great Recession are doomed to be poorer than their parents. Inequality—the fundamental, relentless force in American life since the late 1970s—grew worse.

This second crisis drove a profound wedge between Americans: between the upper and lower classes, Republicans and Democrats, metropolitan and rural people, the native-born and immigrants, ordinary Americans and their leaders. Social bonds had been under growing strain for several decades, and now they began to tear. The reforms of the Obama years, important as they were—in health care, financial regulation, green energy—had only palliative effects. The long recovery over the past decade enriched corporations and investors, lulled professionals, and left the working class further behind. The lasting effect of the slump was to increase polarization and to discredit authority, especially government's.

Both parties were slow to grasp how much credibility they'd lost. The coming politics was populist. Its harbinger wasn't Barack Obama but Sarah Palin, the absurdly unready vice-presidential candidate who scorned expertise and reveled in celebrity. She was Donald Trump's John the Baptist.

Trump came to power as the repudiation of the Republican establishment. But the conservative political class and the new leader soon reached an understanding. Whatever their differences on issues like trade and immigration, they shared a basic goal: to strip-mine public assets for the benefit of private interests. Republican politicians and donors who wanted government to do as little as possible for the common good could live happily with a regime that barely knew how to govern at all, and they made themselves Trump's footmen.

Like a wanton boy throwing matches in a parched field, Trump began to immolate what was left of national civic life. He never even pretended to be president of the whole country, but pitted us against one another along lines of race, sex, religion, citizenship, education, region, and—every day of his presidency—political party. His main tool of governance was to lie. A third of the country locked itself in a hall of mirrors that it believed to be reality; a third drove itself mad with the effort to hold on to the idea of knowable truth; and a third gave up even trying.

Trump acquired a federal government crippled by years of right-wing ideological assault, politicization by both parties, and steady defunding. He set about finishing off the job and destroying the professional civil service. He drove out some of the most talented and experienced career officials, left essential positions unfilled, and installed loyalists as commissars over the cowed survivors, with one purpose: to serve his own interests. His major legislative accomplishment, one of the largest tax cuts in history, sent hundreds of billions of dollars to corporations and the rich. The beneficiaries flocked to patronize his resorts and line his reelection pockets. If lying was his means for using power, corruption was his end.

This was the American landscape that lay open to the virus: in prosperous cities, a class of globally connected desk workers dependent on a class of precarious and invisible service workers; in the countryside, decaying communities in revolt against the modern world; on social media, mutual hatred and endless vituperation among different camps; in the economy, even with full employment, a large and growing gap between triumphant capital and beleaguered labor; in Washington, an empty government led by a con man and his intellectually bankrupt party; around the country, a mood of cynical exhaustion, with no vision of a shared identity or future.

IF THE PANDEMIC really is a kind of war, it's the first to be fought on this soil in a century and a half. Invasion and occupation expose a society's fault lines, exaggerating what goes unnoticed or accepted in peacetime, clarifying essential truths, raising the smell of buried rot.

The virus should have united Americans against a common threat. With different leadership, it might have. Instead, even as it spread from blue to red areas, attitudes broke down along familiar partisan lines. The virus also should have been a great leveler. You don't have to be in the military or in debt to be a target—you just have to be human. But from the start, its effects have been skewed by the inequality that we've tolerated for so long. When tests for the virus were almost impossible to find, the wealthy and connected—the model and reality-TV host Heidi Klum, the entire roster of the Brooklyn Nets, the president's conservative allies—were somehow able to get tested, despite many showing no symptoms. The smattering of individual results did nothing to protect public health. Meanwhile, ordinary people with fevers and chills had to wait in long and possibly infectious lines, only to be turned away because they weren't actually suffocating. An internet joke proposed that the only way to find out whether you had the virus was to sneeze in a rich person's face.

When Trump was asked about this blatant unfairness, he expressed disapproval but added, "Perhaps that's been the story of life." Most Americans hardly register this kind of special privilege in normal times. But in the first weeks of the pandemic it sparked outrage, as if, during a general mobilization, the rich had been allowed to buy their way out of military service and hoard gas masks. As the contagion has spread, its victims have been likely to be poor, black, and brown people. The gross inequality of our health-care system is evident in the sight of refrigerated trucks lined up outside public hospitals.

We now have two categories of work: essential and nonessential. Who have the essential workers turned out to be? Mostly people in low-paying jobs that require their physical presence and put their health directly at risk: warehouse workers, shelf-stockers, Instacart shoppers, delivery drivers, municipal employees, hospital staffers, home health aides, long-haul truckers. Doctors and nurses are the pandemic's combat heroes, but the supermarket cashier with her bottle of sanitizer and the UPS driver with his latex gloves are the supply and logistics troops who keep the frontline forces intact. In a smartphone economy that hides whole classes of human beings, we're learning where our food and goods come from, who keeps us alive. An order of organic baby arugula on AmazonFresh is cheap and arrives overnight in part because the people who grow it, sort it, pack it, and deliver it have to keep working while sick. For most service workers, sick leave turns out to be an impossible luxury. It's worth asking if we would accept a higher price and slower delivery so that they could stay home.

ILLUSTRATION BY OLIVER MUNDAY

The pandemic has also clarified the meaning of nonessential workers. One example is Kelly Loeffler, the Republican junior senator from Georgia, whose sole qualification for the empty seat that she was given in January is her immense wealth. Less than three weeks into the job, after a dire private briefing about the virus, she got even richer from the selling-off of stocks, then she accused Democrats of exaggerating the danger and gave her constituents false assurances that may well have gotten them killed. Loeffler's impulses in public service are those of a dangerous parasite. A body politic that would place someone like this in high office is well advanced in decay.

The purest embodiment of political nihilism is not Trump himself but his son-in-law and senior adviser, Jared Kushner. In his short lifetime, Kushner has been fraudulently promoted as both a meritocrat and a populist. He was born into a moneyed real-estate family the month Ronald Reagan entered the Oval Office, in 1981—a princeling of the second Gilded Age. Despite Jared's mediocre academic record, he was admitted to Harvard after his father, Charles, pledged a $2.5 million donation to the university. Father helped son with $10 million in loans for a start in the family business, then Jared continued his elite education at the law and business schools of NYU, where his father had contributed $3 million. Jared repaid his father's support with fierce loyalty when Charles was sentenced to two years in federal prison in 2005 for trying to resolve a family legal quarrel by entrapping his sister's husband with a prostitute and videotaping the encounter.

Jared Kushner failed as a skyscraper owner and a newspaper publisher, but he always found someone to rescue him, and his self-confidence only grew. In *American Oligarchs*, Andrea Bernstein describes how he adopted the outlook of a risk-taking entrepreneur, a "disruptor" of the new economy. Under the influence of his mentor Rupert Murdoch, he found ways to fuse his financial, political, and journalistic pursuits. He made conflicts of interest his business model.

So when his father-in-law became president, Kushner quickly gained power in an administration that raised amateurism, nepotism, and corruption to governing principles. As long as he busied himself with Middle East peace, his feckless meddling didn't matter to most Americans. But since he became an influential adviser to Trump on the coronavirus pandemic, the result has been mass death.

In his first week on the job, in mid-March, Kushner coauthored the worst Oval Office speech in memory, interrupted the vital work of other officials, may have compromised security protocols, flirted with conflicts of interest and violations of federal law, and made fatuous promises that quickly turned to dust. "The federal government is not designed to solve all our problems," he said, explaining how he would tap his corporate connections to create drive-through testing sites. They never materialized. He was convinced by corporate leaders that Trump should not use presidential authority to compel industries to manufacture ventilators—then Kushner's own attempt to negotiate a deal with General Motors fell through. With no loss of faith in himself, he blamed shortages of necessary equipment and gear on incompetent state governors.

To watch this pale, slim-suited dilettante breeze into the middle of a deadly crisis, dispensing business-school jargon to cloud the massive failure of his father-in-law's administration, is to see the collapse of a whole approach to governing. It turns out that scientific experts and other civil servants are not traitorous members of a "deep state"—they're essential workers, and marginalizing them in favor of ideologues and sycophants is a threat to the nation's health. It turns out that "nimble" companies can't prepare for a catastrophe or distribute lifesaving goods—only a competent federal government can do that. It turns out that everything has a cost, and years of attacking government, squeezing it dry and draining its morale, inflict a heavy cost that the public has to pay in lives. All the programs defunded, stockpiles depleted, and plans scrapped meant that we had become a second-rate nation. Then came the virus and this strange defeat.

THE VIRUS SHOULD HAVE UNITED AMERICANS AGAINST A COMMON THREAT. WITH DIFFERENT LEADERSHIP, IT MIGHT HAVE.

The fight to overcome the pandemic must also be a fight to recover the health of our country, and build it anew, or the hardship and grief we're now enduring will never be redeemed. Under our current leadership, nothing will change. If 9/11 and 2008 wore out trust in the old political establishment, 2020 should kill off the idea that anti-politics is our salvation. But putting an end to this regime, so necessary and deserved, is only the beginning.

We're faced with a choice that the crisis makes inescapably clear. We can stay hunkered down in self-isolation, fearing and shunning one another, letting our common bond wear away to nothing. Or we can use this pause in our normal lives to pay attention to the hospital workers holding up cellphones so their patients can say goodbye to loved ones; the planeload of medical workers flying from Atlanta to help in New York; the aerospace workers in Massachusetts demanding that their factory be converted to ventilator production; the Floridians standing in long lines because they couldn't get through by phone to the skeletal unemployment office; the residents of Milwaukee braving endless waits, hail, and contagion to vote in an election forced on them by partisan justices. We can learn from these dreadful days that stupidity and injustice are lethal; that, in a democracy, being a citizen is essential work; that the alternative to solidarity is death. After we've come out of hiding and taken off our masks, we should not forget what it was like to be alone. 𝒜

George Packer is a staff writer at The Atlantic.

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HOW MICROBES WRITE HISTORY

Plagues leave societies permanently altered—often in surprising ways.

BY CHARLES C. MANN

In 2008 a young economist named Craig Garthwaite went looking for sick people. He found them in the National Health Interview Survey. Conducted annually by the U.S. Census Bureau since 1957, the NHIS is the oldest and biggest continuing effort to track Americans' health. The survey asks a large sample of the citizenry whether it has a variety of ailments, including diabetes, kidney disorders, and several types of heart disease. Garthwaite sought out a particular subset of respondents: people born between October 1918 and June 1919.

Those months were the height and immediate aftermath of the world's worst-ever influenza pandemic. Although medical data from the time are too scant to be definitive, its first attack is generally said to have occurred in Kansas in March 1918, as the U.S. was stepping up its involvement in the First World War. In a flurry of wartime propaganda, American and European governments downplayed the epidemic, which helped it spread. Estimates of the final death toll range from 17 million to 100 million, depending on assumptions about the number of uncounted victims. Almost 700,000 people are thought to have died in the United States—as a proportion of the population, equivalent to more than 2 million people today.

Remarkably, the calamity left few visible traces in American culture. Hemingway, Faulkner, Fitzgerald, and Dos Passos saw its terrible effects firsthand, but almost never mentioned it in their work. Nor did the flu affect U.S. policies—Congress didn't even allocate extra money for flu research afterward.

Just a few decades after the pandemic, American-history textbooks by the distinguished likes of Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., Richard Hofstadter, Henry Steele Commager, and Samuel Eliot Morison said not a word about it. The first history of the 1918 flu wasn't published until 1976—I drew some of the above from it. Written by the late Alfred W. Crosby, the book is called *America's Forgotten Pandemic*.

Americans may have forgotten the 1918 pandemic, but it did not forget them. Garthwaite matched NHIS respondents' health conditions to the dates when their mothers were probably exposed to the flu. Mothers who got sick in the first months of pregnancy, he discovered, had babies who, 60 or 70 years later, were unusually likely to have diabetes; mothers afflicted at the end of pregnancy tended to bear children prone to kidney disease. The middle months were associated with heart disease.

HISTORIANS HAVE HAD TROUBLE ACCEPTING THAT BRAINLESS PACKETS OF RNA AND DNA CAN CAPSIZE THE HUMAN ENTERPRISE.

Other studies showed different consequences. Children born during the pandemic grew into shorter, poorer, less educated adults with higher rates of physical disability than one would expect. Chances are that none of Garthwaite's flu babies ever knew about the shadow the pandemic cast over their lives. But they were living testaments to a brutal truth: Pandemics—even forgotten ones—have long-term, powerful aftereffects.

The distinguished historians can be forgiven for passing over this truth. Most modern people assume that our species controls its own destiny. *We're in charge!* we think. *After all, isn't this the Anthropocene?* Being modern people, historians have had trouble, as a profession, truly accepting that brainless packets of RNA and DNA can capsize the human enterprise in a few weeks or months.

The convulsive social changes of the 1920s—the frenzy of financial speculation, the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan, the explosion of Dionysian popular culture (jazz, flappers, speakeasies)—were easily attributed to the war, an initiative directed and conducted by humans, rather than to the blind actions of microorganisms. But the microorganisms likely killed more people than the war did. And their effects weren't confined to European battlefields, but spread across the globe, emptying city streets and filling cemeteries on six continents.

Unlike the war, the flu was incomprehensible—the influenza virus wasn’t even identified until 1931. It inspired fear of immigrants and foreigners, and anger toward the politicians who played down the virus. Like the war, influenza (and tuberculosis, which subsequently hit many flu sufferers) killed more men than women, skewing sex ratios for years afterward. Can one be sure that the ensuing, abrupt changes in gender roles had nothing to do with the virus?

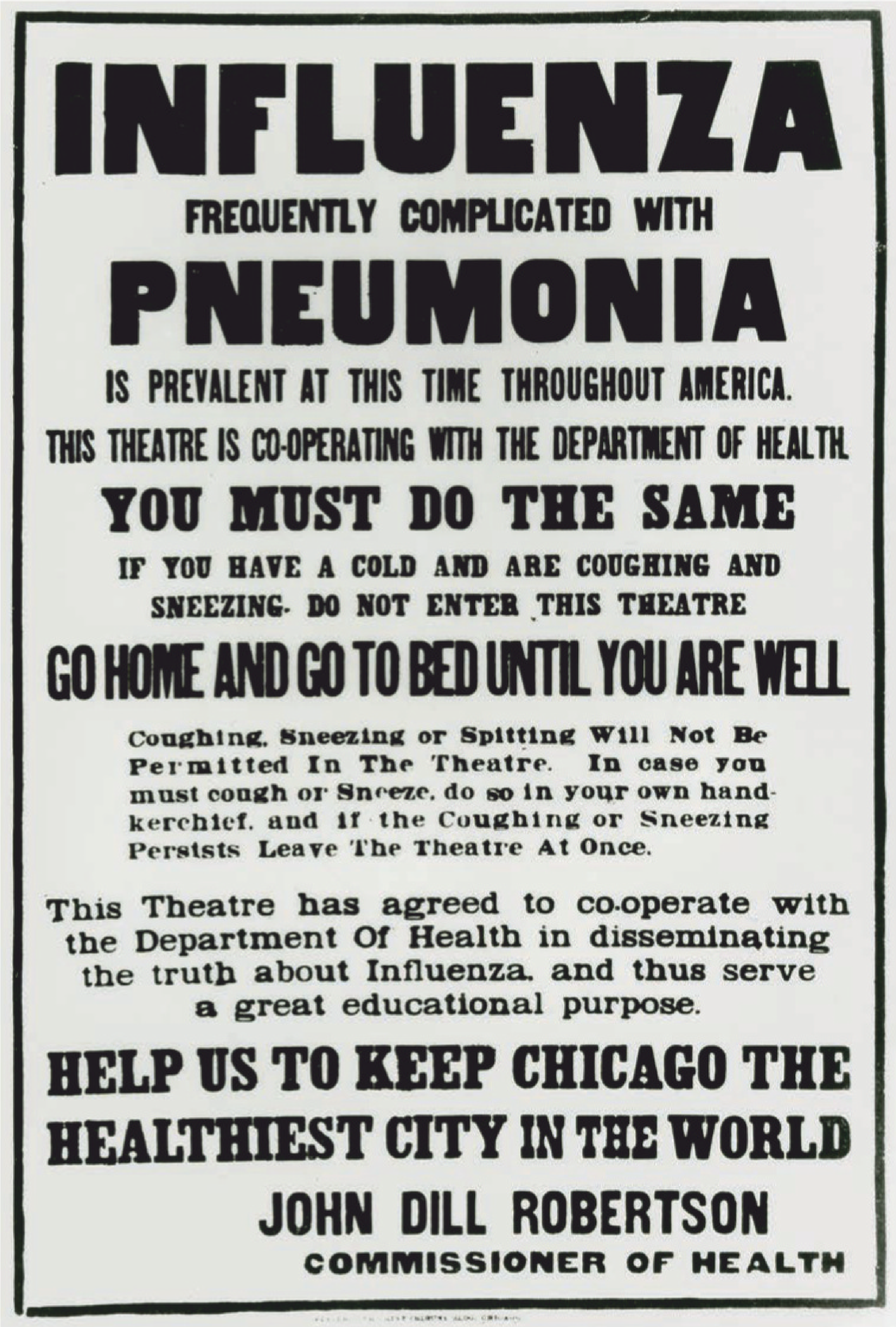
We will probably never disentangle the war and the flu. But one way to summarize the impact of the pandemic is to say that its magnitude was in the same neighborhood as that of the “war to end all wars.”

NOBODY CAN PREDICT the consequences of today’s coronavirus pandemic. But history can tell us a little about what kind of landscape we’re approaching.

Consider the Black Death. Sweeping through Europe from about 1347 to 1350, the plague killed somewhere between a third and half of all Europeans. In England, so many people died that the population didn’t climb back to its pre-plague level for almost 400 years.

With the supply of European workers suddenly reduced and the demand for labor relatively unchanged, medieval landowners found themselves in a pickle: They could leave their grain to rot in the fields, or they could abandon all sense of right and wrong and raise wages enough to attract scarce workers. In northern Italy, landlords tended to raise wages, which fostered the development of a middle class. In southern Italy, the nobility enacted decrees to prevent peasants from leaving to take better offers. Some historians date the separation in fortunes of the two halves of Italy—the rich north, the poor south—to these decisions.

When the Black Death began, the English Plantagenets were in the middle of a long, brutal campaign to conquer France. The population losses meant such a rise in the cost of infantrymen that the whole enterprise foundered. English nobles did not occupy French châteaux. Instead they stayed home and tried to force their farmhands to accept lower wages. The result, the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381, nearly toppled the English crown. King Richard II narrowly won out, but the monarchy’s ability to



INFLUENZA

FREQUENTLY COMPLICATED WITH

PNEUMONIA

IS PREVALENT AT THIS TIME THROUGHOUT AMERICA.

THIS THEATRE IS CO-OPERATING WITH THE DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH.

YOU MUST DO THE SAME

IF YOU HAVE A COLD AND ARE COUGHING AND SNEEZING. DO NOT ENTER THIS THEATRE

GO HOME AND GO TO BED UNTIL YOU ARE WELL

Coughing, Sneezing or Spitting Will Not Be Permitted In The Theatre. In case you must cough or Sneeze, do so in your own handkerchief, and if the Coughing or Sneezing Persists Leave The Theatre At Once.

This Theatre has agreed to co-operate with the Department Of Health in disseminating the truth about Influenza, and thus serve a great educational purpose.

HELP US TO KEEP CHICAGO THE HEALTHIEST CITY IN THE WORLD

JOHN DILL ROBERTSON

COMMISSIONER OF HEALTH

A poster from 1918 asks Chicagoans to self-quarantine if they have symptoms of the flu.

COURTESY NATIONAL LIBRARY OF MEDICINE

impose taxes, and thus its will, was permanently weakened.

Nobody thinks the coronavirus will kill anywhere near as many people as the Black Death did. A shortage of labor due to corpses piling up in the streets will not cause wages to rise. Even so, the new virus has been a shock to society. The plague struck a Europe that was used to widespread death from contagious disease, especially among children. The coronavirus is hitting societies that regarded deadly epidemics as things of the past, like whalebone corsets and bowler hats.

When I went to college, in the 1970s, premed students carried around a fat textbook co-written by the Nobel Prize–winning virologist Macfarlane Burnet. "The most likely forecast about the future of infectious disease," it sunnily concluded, "is that it will be very dull." Such optimism was not exceptional. A few years later, Robert G. Petersdorf, a future president of the Association of American Medical Colleges, contemplated the current crop of M.D.s seeking certification in infectious disease and said, "I cannot conceive of a need for 309 more infectious-disease experts unless they spend their time culturing each other."

When AIDS came into the world, disease researchers reconsidered, loudly warning of new pandemics. Journalists wrote books with titles such as *The Coming Plague* and *Spillover: Animal Infections and the Next Human Pandemic*. But not many nonscientists took these warnings to heart. The American public has not enjoyed its surprise reentry into the world of contagion and quarantine—and this unhappiness seems likely to have consequences.

Scholars have long posited that the shattering of norms by the Black Death was the first step on the path that led to the Renaissance and the Reformation. Neither government nor Church could explain the plague or provide a cure, the theory goes, leading to a crisis in belief. Secular and religious leaders died just like common people—the Black Death killed the archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Bradwardine, a mere 40 days after he assumed office. People sought new sources of authority, finding them through direct personal experience with the world and with God.

To some extent, all of this is surely true. The plague came in waves, and after each wave doctors, clerics, and chroniclers speculated about the causes and described the treatments they'd seen deployed. As the University of Glasgow historian Samuel K. Cohn Jr. has shown, the early claims about the plague's origin invoked "floods of snakes and toads, snows that melted mountains, black smoke, venomous fumes, deafening thunder, lightning bolts, hailstones, and eight-legged worms that killed with their stench." Some writers blamed the poor: their fecundity, their improvidence, their sinfulness. Others pointed fingers at that ever-ready European bogeyman, the Jew.

To save themselves from the disease, scared Europeans sought favor from the heavens, most famously taking off their clothes in groups and striking one another with whips and sticks. Images of half-nude flagellants have, since Monty Python, become a comic staple. Far less comical was the accompanying flood of anti-Semitic violence. As it spread through Germany, Switzerland, France, Spain, and the Low Countries, it left behind a trail of beaten cadavers and burned homes.

Within a few decades, Cohn wrote, hysteria gave way to sober observation. Medical tracts stopped referring to conjunctions of Saturn and prescribed more earthly cures: ointments, herbs, methods for lancing boils. Even priestly writings focused on the empirical. "God was not mentioned," Cohn noted. The massacres of Jews mostly stopped.

It's easy to see this as a comforting parable of rationality winning out over the engines of rumor, prejudice, and superstition, ultimately leading to the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. But the lesson seems more that humans confronting unexpected disaster engage in a contest for explanation—and the outcome can have consequences that ripple for decades or centuries.

As I write, the contest for explanation is well under way—Donald Trump is to blame, or Barack Obama, or the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, or China, or the U.S. military's biowarfare experiments, or Bill Gates. Nobody has yet invoked eight-legged worms. But in our age of social media, the engines of rumor, prejudice, and superstition may have even greater power than they did in the era of the Black Death.

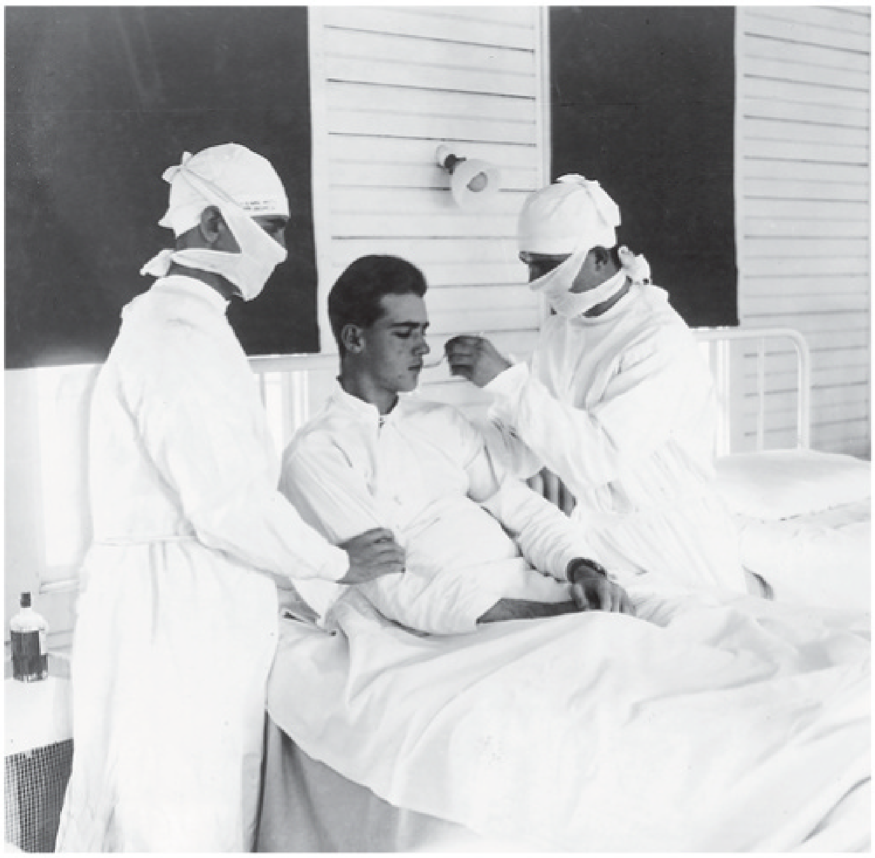
CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS'S journey to the Americas set off the worst demographic catastrophe in history. The indigenous societies of the Americas had few communicable diseases—no smallpox, no measles, no cholera, no typhoid, no malaria, no bubonic plague. When Europeans imported these diseases into the Western Hemisphere, it was as if all the suffering and death these ailments had caused in Europe during the previous millennia were compressed into about 150 years.

Somewhere between two-thirds and nine-tenths of the people in the Americas died. Many later European settlers, like my umpteen-great-grandparents, believed they were coming to a vacant wilderness. But the land was not empty; it had been *emptied*—a world of loss encompassed in a shift of tense.

Absent the diseases, it is difficult to imagine how small groups of poorly equipped Europeans at the end of very long supply chains could have survived and even thrived in the alien ecosystems of the Americas. "I fully support banning travel from Europe to prevent the spread of infectious disease," the Cherokee journalist Rebecca Nagle remarked after President Trump announced his plan to do this. "I just think it's 528 years too late."

For Native Americans, the epidemic era lasted for centuries, as did its repercussions. Isolated Hawaii had almost no bacterial or viral disease until 1778, when the islands were "discovered" by Captain James Cook. Islanders learned the cruel facts of contagion so rapidly that by 1806, local leaders were refusing to allow European ships to dock if they had sick people on board. Nonetheless, Hawaii's king and queen traveled from their clean islands to London, that cesspool of disease, arriving in May 1824. By July they were dead—measles.

Kamehameha II and Kamāmalu had gone to Britain to negotiate an alliance against the United States, which they correctly believed had designs on their nation. Their deaths scuttled the talks, and their successor, 12-year-old King Kamehameha III, could not resume them. The results changed the islands' political destiny. Undeterred by the British navy, the U.S. annexed Hawaii in 1898. Historians have seldom noted the connection between measles and the presidency of Barack Obama.



Doctors treat an influenza patient at the U.S. Naval Hospital in New Orleans during the 1918 pandemic.

MPI / GETTY

As a rule, epidemics create what researchers call a "U-shaped curve" of mortality—high death rates among the very young and very old, lower rates among working-age adults. (The 1918 flu was an exception; a disproportionate number of 20-somethings perished.) For Native peoples, the U-shaped curve was as devastating as the sheer loss of life. As an indigenous archaeologist once put it to me, the epidemics simultaneously robbed his nation of its future and its past: the former, by killing all the children; the latter, by killing all the elders, who were its storehouses of wisdom and experience.

For reasons as yet unknown, the U-shaped curve does not apply to today's coronavirus. This virus largely (but not entirely) spares the young and targets the old. Terrible stories of it sweeping through nursing homes reinforce this impression, especially if, like me, you've lost a relative in one. The result will be, among other things, a test of how much contemporary U.S. society values the elderly.

So far, the evidence suggests: not much. The speed with which pundits emerged to propose that the U.S. could more easily tolerate a raft of dead oldsters than an economic contraction indicates that the reservoir of appreciation for today's elders is not as deep as it once was. This change may reflect another: Today's old are typically older than the old of the past, when life spans were shorter, and more likely to be retired.

Past societies mourned the loss of collective memory caused by epidemics. Ours may not, at least at first.

I HAVE NO IDEA what the ultimate effects of the coronavirus will be in this country, but I hope that they will be like those of the 2003 SARS epidemic in Hong Kong. That epidemic, which killed about 300 people, was stopped only by heroic communal efforts. (As a percentage of the population, the equivalent U.S. death toll would be about 15,000.)

Everyone in Hong Kong knows the city dodged a bullet. Or, at any rate, it seems that way when I visit. My work has taken me there, off and on, since 1992. In a city that once resounded with smokers' coughs, people now don hospital masks at the first sign of a cold. Omnipresent signs—in hotel elevators, on convenience-store doors, in office waiting rooms—describe how often their locations are disinfected. An amazing number of people wear hospital gloves to serve food, handle papers, even push elevator buttons. During my stays, the TV news seems always to be covering disease outbreaks in remote places, as if trying to keep viewers on alert.

These measures may suggest a community in the grip of fear. But the masks and signs and gloves seem more like the "victory gardens" in families' front yards during the Second World War—cheerful public notices of people doing their part. Most important, Hong Kong may have contained COVID-19 faster than any other place in the world.

The last time I went there was during last fall's democracy protests. At one point, I found myself near a university at the center of the unrest. Almost nobody was outside and the shops were closed. There was a lot of trash on the ground and smoke in the air. As I stood there, befuddled, a man ran out of a convenience store and pulled me inside. "The police are coming," he said. "Very dangerous!" Inside was a cross section of Hong Kong citizens—young and old, sneakers and salaryman shoes, quite a few in makeshift masks. I thanked the proprietor for rescuing me from what could have been an unpleasant encounter. "We are all here together," someone said.

Later it occurred to me that a possible legacy of Hong Kong's success with SARS is that its citizens seem to put more faith in collective action than they used to. I've met plenty of people there who believe that the members of their community can work together for the greater good—as they did in suppressing SARS and will, with luck, keep doing with COVID-19. It's probably naive of me to hope that successfully containing the coronavirus would impart some of the same faith in the United States, but I do anyway.

Charles C. Mann is a contributing writer at The Atlantic. *Financial support for this article was provided by the HHMI Department of Science Education.*

THE FELLOWSHIP OF SUFFERING

Why some of us thrive in times of crisis

BY VIVIAN GORNICK

I know a woman, very nearly a misanthrope—I'll call her Stella—who lives alone and is convinced that everyone in the world has a better life than she. Stella's days are often consumed by the kind of envious depression that only a solitary of her stripe can experience. Years of psychotherapy have persuaded her that she alone can break her isolation, yet she is unable to act on what she knows. But a few weeks ago, as everyone everywhere was being put under house arrest, I called to see how she was doing and, in a voice clear as a bell, she said, "Fine, I'm fine." Startled, I asked, "How come?" Equally startled, she said, "Because we're all in this together."

Ah, I thought, *that's it.* Inequality had always been her bête noire. Now that we were facing a threat of illness and death from which no one was exempt, the playing field felt level to her. A privileged life wouldn't necessarily save a person any more than a desperate one would condemn another. I understood. I have long thought that social inequality is the bane of human existence. To me, equality, more than justice or liberty, is what we crave.

Still, I thought, it was curious that my friend was able to throw off the compulsion of her solitary state so quickly, connecting herself so fast to the crisis at hand. And very soon I saw the phenomenon replicate itself in others like her—loners who sped into public service faster than altruism could explain. These were people who trusted no one, joined nothing, signed nothing; yet here they were making masks, checking on neighbors, bagging groceries. What, exactly, was motivating them now to assume an attitude of solidarity?

In puzzling over this question, I've found myself thinking of the Italian writer Natalia Ginzburg more than once. Ginzburg came from a dysfunctional family and very young she learned that self-protection required the cultivation of an inner distance from others. Eventually it took a heavy toll. In adolescence, she developed a "stony-faced" (her word) hauteur that made her feel unreal to herself, and soon enough it made everyone around her seem unreal as well. In time she became sealed into an emotional anomie that hardened with the years.

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In 1938, at the age of 21, Natalia married Leone Ginzburg, an anti-fascist, and, in 1941, when he was declared persona non grata by the government, accompanied him into what was then called "internal exile"—removal to some rural area far from the urban centers. In 1943, after the fall of Mussolini, the family (by then they had three children) decided it was safe to move back to Rome—a miscalculation for which they would pay dearly. Leone went first, and five months later Natalia and the children followed. Within 20 days of the family's arrival in the city, Leone was arrested by German police and taken off to prison, where he was tortured and killed.

Ginzburg's armor—her haughty anomie—had been in place all this time. But now, with war on the ground—the loss of her young husband, death raining from the sky, countless children abandoned in the rubble—life shocked her into an experience she could never have imagined. Suddenly, she felt stifled inside the separateness from others she had valued all these

By learning to ask for help and to give it, Natalia Ginzburg wrote, she had "found a point of equilibrium for our wavering life."

CELESTINA VATERRA / SÜDDEUTSCHE ZEITUNG PHOTO / ALAMY

ILLUSTRATION BY NAJEEBAH AL-GHADBAN

years. No longer a protection, this deep withdrawal of hers now seemed dangerous: a threat to her own survival. Somehow, she realized, she must begin to feel connected, or at least to *act* as though she felt connected. She must teach herself—now!—to mimic the look and feel of unthinking, everyday comradeship.

Ah, she has it: "We learn," she writes with something like wonder in her voice, "to ask for help from the first passer-by." And then, "we learn to give help to the first passer-by." And then, at last, she finds herself—and that's exactly it: *finds* herself—feeling not only saved but curiously alive through the simple act of taking part in the fellowship of suffering.

The experience led Ginzburg to the insight that dominated her work for the rest of her life. In "that brief moment when one day it fell to our lot to live when we had looked at the things of the world for the last time," she had "found a point of equilibrium for our wavering life." From then on, she writes, "we could look at our neighbor with a gaze that would always be just and free, not the timid or contemptuous gaze of someone who whenever he is with his neighbor always asks himself if he is his master or his servant."

I don't for a minute believe that this seemingly epiphanic moment brought about a permanent change in Ginzburg's behavior. But when the war was over and the fellowship of suffering had loosened its hold on her, she remained grateful to both, not because they had destroyed her original sense of aloofness but because they had taught her that it had been in place for so much of her life. She now understood that all these years she had been a stranger to herself.

ONCE, MANY YEARS AGO in Israel, I saw something that reminded me of Ginzburg's wartime transformation. At that time, I knew a number of women who had been young during the War of Independence. They had lived through every Arab-Israeli conflict since; they were tough. In peacetime I never saw one of them embrace a friend, a relative, or a colleague, much less exhibit an iota of real affection or even share a comradely laugh. In that bullying fear of tenderness, I thought I saw an invisible barrier of emotional withdrawal that separated them from all others.

Then, one day, there was a war alert. When the tanks began to roll, the most remarkable change came over these women. In no time they were all out in the street, pressing packages of food and books and clothes on the soldiers passing by in armored vehicles. What astonished me was the *gratitude* in their eyes. They were unmistakably grateful for the mayhem to come, grateful that it was allowing them to forget the burden of their own defended selves, grateful to be entering into the only circumstance that could dissolve the inner emptiness: the ever-enlivening fellowship of suffering.

Recently, I saw something on television that brought back the memory of those Israeli women. In a video of the intensive-care unit at a Bronx hospital that had been converted into a coronavirus facility, doctors, nurses, and technicians surrounded a patient who was clearly failing. Most striking, I thought, was the intensity of the collaborative effort being expended on behalf of whoever it was lying there under the lights and the sheets. As dedicated as these people in the ICU obviously were to saving the patient, I could almost see in their eyes, above the masks, the pleasure that each seemed to take in relying on the others to do what they alone could do. And yes, I'll say it, the gratitude. Here was a shared dependency acting like an elixir, warding off the exhaustion that otherwise would surely have felled many. What was passing among *them* was the vital experience here.

WHEN THE TANKS BEGAN TO ROLL, THE MOST REMARKABLE CHANGE CAME OVER THESE WOMEN. THEY WERE UNMISTAKABLY GRATEFUL FOR THE MAYHEM TO COME.

A person who would certainly have understood the complexity of the human needs on display in that ICU was the great Elizabeth Cady Stanton, America's most philosophically minded feminist. Stanton spent 50 glorious years in public life, always happy to be living in a mob scene on behalf of suffrage for women. Yet she ended her career with a speech called "Solitude of Self," in which, after all her years in politics, she said that she had come to realize that all human beings are sealed into an essential aloneness from which there is no escape.

Reading Stanton's speech, one senses that perhaps the aloneness is innate. However close people are to one another—family, friends, lovers—there is a level of confession to which none descends; it is the level at which the fear of humiliation is paramount. To the greatest degree our solitude is self-created, locked as we are from birth into a psychology of shame.

Precisely because we are such damaged creatures, the chance to fight those external forces that contribute to the forlornness of our natural state is incredibly marvelous. Stanton did not think that suffrage would eliminate the ingrown solitariness—but she did think that our engagement with the Cause, whatever it might be, would let everyone (even those drowning in anomie) grow a self strong enough and independent enough to do battle with life's irreducible starkness.

Toward the end of the video of that ICU in the Bronx hospital, a woman who had been hovering beyond the edge of the bed, wearing the uniform of a volunteer, left the cubicle with a blood-spattered towel in her hands. As she walked through the glass doors she pulled off her mask and, to my amazement, I saw that she was my friend Stella. She looked as I had never seen her look, in the 30 years I've known her: exalted.

Vivian Gornick writes essays, criticism, and memoir. Her newest book is Unfinished Business: Notes of a Chronic Re-reader.

IN UNCERTAIN TIMES, YOU CAN BE CERTAIN OF THIS: YOUR GENEROSITY WILL MAKE A DIFFERENCE.

Today, thanks to donors like you, The Salvation Army is helping those affected by COVID-19. We are there for the most vulnerable in our community. For those whose wages are gone, for those who need food, for those who have no place to call home, and for so many others who desperately need help and hope in this time of crisis. To see how you can continue to make a difference in your community, give today at SalvationArmyUSA.org.

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MOST GOOD®

THE SALVATION ARMY

The Beauty of Age

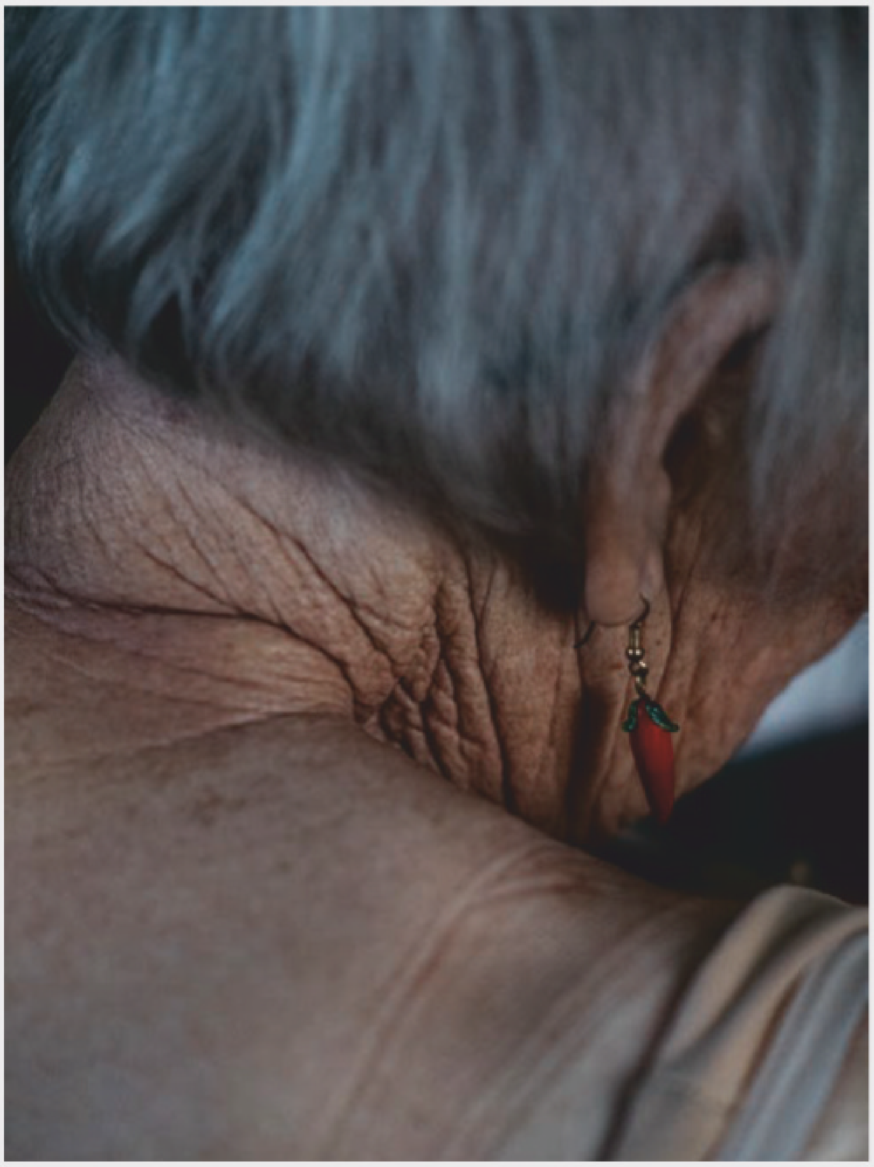
Photographs by Erin Kirkland

The King's Daughters Home in Mexico, Missouri, which opened in 1905, still occupies its original building. The nursing home started with 10 beds for women who had never married—nuns and teachers, mostly, who eventually left their assets to the home, adding to its endowment over the years. Today there are 45 beds, still all for women. "Gracious Living for Gracious Ladies," the website proudly proclaims.

The week that the photographer Erin Kirkland visited King's Daughters, in June 2019, two residents died. Kirkland wanted to show joy in her images, she told me, but "there was overall heaviness that tinted everything that week." Some of that heaviness comes through in the resulting work, but so, too, do the women's resilience and their care for one another. Two women hold hands at the breakfast table (*page 24, top*). A 98-year-old comforts an 81-year-old with Alzheimer's, who doesn't recognize her visiting husband, by reminding her that she does, in fact, know the man in front of her (*opposite page*). Kirkland worked to keep her photographs free of nostalgia, she said. Her aim, instead, was to focus on the present, celebrating the beauty of age.

Right now, because of the coronavirus, visitors are not allowed inside the home. Some women see family through a window, on videochat, or at a distance in the parking lot; others haven't seen their relatives in weeks. Residents must stay physically separate from one another and most take all their meals in their rooms. Staff members have their temperature taken at the entrance. In an effort to keep spirits lifted, communal TVs play only the Hallmark Channel—no news. And normal daily activities like dancing, bingo, and Bible study—it is a nondenominational Christian home—go on. Darus Love, the home's administrator, told me his goal is to foster an environment of "compassionate calm" for the duration of the pandemic. "The ladies," Love said, have "survived much harder times."

— Amy Weiss-Meyer



KENNEDY
THE END IS COMING
THE END IS COMING
D IS COMING

ILLUSTRATIONS BY ARSH RAZIUDDIN

NOTHING NOTHING NOTHING CAN STOP WHAT IS COMING

QANON IS A CONSPIRACY THEORY WITH MESSIANIC OVERTONES AND DARK PREDICTIONS. ITS LEGIONS OF FOLLOWERS ARE GROWING. AND IT’S A HARBINGER OF A WORLD WHERE FACTS AND REALITY DON’T MATTER.

BY ADRIENNE LaFRANCE

IRA WYMAN / GETTY ; EVAN EL-AMIN / SHUTTERSTOCK

If you were an adherent, no one would be able to tell. You would look like any other American. You could be a mother, picking leftovers off your toddler's plate. You could be the young man in headphones across the street. You could be a bookkeeper, a dentist, a grandmother icing cupcakes in her kitchen. You may well have an affiliation with an evangelical church. But you are hard to identify just from the way you look—which is good, because someday soon dark forces may try to track you down. You understand this sounds crazy, but you don't care. You know that a small group of manipulators, operating in the shadows, pull the planet's strings. You know that they are powerful enough to abuse children without fear of retribution. You know that the mainstream media are their handmaidens, in partnership with Hillary Clinton and the secretive denizens of the deep state. You know that only Donald Trump stands between you and a damned and ravaged world. You see plague and pestilence sweeping the planet, and understand that they are part of the plan. You know that a clash between good and evil cannot be avoided, and you yearn for the Great Awakening that is coming. And so you must be on guard at all times. You must shield your ears from the scorn of the ignorant. You must find those who are like you. And you must be prepared to fight.

You know all this because you believe in Q.

I. GENESIS

THE ORIGINS OF QAnon are recent, but even so, separating myth from reality can be hard. One place to begin is with Edgar Maddison Welch, a deeply religious father of two, who until Sunday, December 4, 2016, had lived an unremarkable life in the small town of Salisbury, North Carolina. That morning, Welch grabbed his cellphone, a box of shotgun shells, and three loaded guns—a 9-mm AR-15 rifle, a six-shot .38-caliber Colt revolver, and a shotgun—and hopped into his Toyota Prius. He drove 360 miles to a well-to-do neighborhood in Northwest Washington, D.C.; parked his car; put the revolver in a holster at his hip; held the AR-15 rifle across his chest; and walked through the front door of a pizzeria called Comet Ping Pong.

Comet happens to be the place where, on a Sunday afternoon two years earlier, my then-baby daughter tried her first-ever sip of water. Kids gather there with their parents and teammates after soccer games on Saturdays, and local bands perform on the weekends. In the back, children challenge their grandparents to Ping-Pong matches as they wait for their pizzas to come out of the big clay oven in the middle of the restaurant. Comet Ping Pong is a beloved spot in Washington.

That day, people noticed Welch right away. An AR-15 rifle makes for a conspicuous sash in most social settings, but especially at a place like Comet. As parents, children, and employees rushed outside, many still chewing, Welch began to move through the restaurant, at one point attempting to use a butter knife to pry open a locked door, before giving up and firing several rounds from his rifle into the lock. Behind the door was a small computer-storage closet. This was not what he was expecting.

Welch had traveled to Washington because of a conspiracy theory known, now famously, as Pizzagate, which claimed that Hillary Clinton was running a child sex ring out of Comet Ping Pong. The idea originated in October 2016, when WikiLeaks made public a trove of emails stolen from the account of John Podesta, a former White House chief of staff and then the chair of Clinton's presidential campaign; Comet was mentioned repeatedly in exchanges Podesta had with the restaurant's owner, James Alefantis, and others. The emails were mainly about fundraising events, but high-profile pro–Donald Trump figures such as Mike Cernovich and Alex Jones began advancing the claim—which originated in trollish corners of the internet (such as 4chan) and then spread to more accessible precincts (Twitter, YouTube)—that the emails were proof of ritualistic child abuse. Some conspiracy theorists asserted that it was taking place in the basement at Comet, where there is no basement. References in the emails to "pizza" and "pasta" were interpreted as code words for "girls" and "little boys."

Shortly after Trump's election, as Pizzagate roared across the internet, Welch started binge-watching conspiracy-theory videos on YouTube. He tried to recruit help from at least two people to carry out a vigilante raid, texting them about his desire to sacrifice "the lives of a few for the lives of many" and to fight "a corrupt system that kidnaps, tortures and rapes babies and children in our own backyard." When Welch finally found himself inside the restaurant and understood that Comet Ping Pong was just a pizza shop, he set down his firearms, walked out the door, and surrendered to police, who had by then secured the perimeter. "The intel on this wasn't 100 percent," Welch told *The New York Times* after his arrest.

Welch seems to have sincerely believed that children were being held at Comet Ping Pong. His family and friends wrote letters to the judge on his behalf, describing him as a dedicated father, a devout Christian, and a man who went out of his way to care for others. Welch had trained as a volunteer firefighter. He had gone on an earthquake-response mission to Haiti with the local Baptist Men's Association. A friend from his church wrote, "He exhibits the actions of a person who strives to learn biblical truth and apply it." Welch himself expressed what seemed like genuine remorse, saying in a handwritten note submitted to the judge by his lawyers: "It was never my intention to harm or frighten innocent lives, but I realize now just how foolish and reckless my decision was." He was sentenced to four years in prison.

Pizzagate seemed to fade. Some of its most visible proponents, such as Jack Posobiec, a conspiracy theorist who is now a correspondent for the pro-Trump cable-news channel One America News Network, backed away. Facing the specter of legal action by Alefantis, Alex Jones, who runs the conspiracy-theory website Infowars and hosts an affiliated radio show, apologized for promoting Pizzagate.

While Welch may have expressed regret, he gave no indication that he had stopped believing the underlying Pizzagate message: that a cabal of powerful elites was abusing children and getting away with it. Judging from a surge of activity on the internet, many others had found ways to move beyond the Comet Ping Pong episode and remain focused on what they saw as the larger truth. If you paid attention to the right voices on the right websites, you could see in real time how the core premises of Pizzagate were being recycled, revised, and reinterpreted. The millions of people paying attention to sites like 4chan and Reddit could continue to learn about that secretive and untouchable cabal; about its malign actions and intentions; about its ties to the left wing and specifically to Democrats and especially to Clinton; about its bloodlust and its moral degeneracy. You could also—and this would prove essential—read about a small but swelling band of underground American patriots fighting back.

All of this, taken together, defined a worldview that would soon have a name: QAnon, derived from a mysterious figure, "Q," posting anonymously on 4chan. QAnon does not possess a physical location, but it has an infrastructure, a literature, a growing body of adherents, and a great deal of merchandising. It also displays other key qualities that Pizzagate lacked. In the face of inconvenient facts, it has the ambiguity and adaptability to sustain a movement of this kind over time. For QAnon, every contradiction can be explained away; no form of argument can prevail against it.

CONSPIRACY THEORIES ARE a constant in American history, and it is tempting to dismiss them as inconsequential. But as the 21st century has progressed, such a dismissal has begun to require willful blindness. I was a city-hall reporter for a local investigative-news site called *Honolulu Civil Beat* in 2011 when Donald Trump was laying the groundwork for a presidential run by publicly questioning whether Barack Obama had been born in Hawaii, as all facts and documents showed. Trump maintained that Obama had really been born in Africa, and therefore wasn't a natural-born American—making him ineligible for the highest office. I remember the debate in our Honolulu newsroom: Should we even cover this "birther" madness? As it turned out, the allegations, based entirely on lies, captivated enough people to give Trump a launching pad.

Nine years later, as reports of a fearsome new virus suddenly emerged, and with Trump now president, a series of ideas began burbling in the QAnon community: that the coronavirus might not be real; that if it was, it had been created by the "deep state," the star chamber of government officials and other elite figures who secretly run the world; that the hysteria surrounding the pandemic was part of a plot to hurt Trump's reelection chances; and that media elites were cheering the death toll. Some of these ideas would make their way onto Fox News and into the president's public utterances. As of late last year, according to *The New York Times*, Trump had retweeted accounts often focused on conspiracy theories, including those of QAnon, on at least 145 occasions.

The power of the internet was understood early on, but the full nature of that power—its ability to shatter any semblance of shared reality, undermining civil society and democratic governance in the process—was not. The internet also enabled unknown individuals to reach masses of people, at a scale Marshall McLuhan never dreamed of. The warping of shared reality leads a man with an AR-15 rifle to invade a pizza shop. It brings online forums into being where people colorfully imagine the assassination of a former secretary of state. It offers the promise of a Great Awakening, in which the elites will be routed and the truth will be revealed. It causes chat sites to come alive with commentary speculating that the coronavirus pandemic may be the moment QAnon has been waiting for. None of this could have been imagined as recently as the turn of the century.

QAnon is emblematic of modern America's susceptibility to conspiracy theories, and its enthusiasm for them. But it is also already much more than a loose collection of conspiracy-minded chat-room inhabitants. It is a movement united in mass rejection of reason, objectivity, and other Enlightenment values. And we are likely closer to the beginning of its story than the end. The group harnesses paranoia to fervent hope and a deep sense of belonging. The way it breathes life into an ancient preoccupation with end-times is also radically new. To look at QAnon is to see not just a conspiracy theory but the birth of a new religion.

Many people were reluctant to speak with me about QAnon as I reported this story. The movement's adherents have sometimes proved willing to take matters into their own hands. Last year, the FBI classified QAnon as a domestic-terror threat in an internal memo. The memo took note of a California man arrested in 2018 with bomb-making materials. According to the FBI, he had planned to attack the Illinois capitol to "make Americans aware of 'Pizzagate' and the New World Order (NWO) who were dismantling society." The memo also took note of a QAnon follower in Nevada who was arrested in 2018 after blocking traffic on the Hoover Dam in an armored truck. The man, heavily armed, was demanding the release of the inspector general's report on Hillary Clinton's emails. The FBI memo warned that conspiracy theories stoke the threat of extremist violence, especially when individuals "claiming to act as 'researchers' or 'investigators' single out people, businesses, or groups which they falsely accuse of being involved in the imagined scheme."

QAnon adherents are feared for ferociously attacking skeptics online and for inciting physical violence. On a now-defunct Reddit board dedicated to QAnon, commenters took delight in describing Clinton's potential fate. One person wrote: "I'm surprised no one has assassinated her yet honestly." Another: "The buzzards rip her rotting corpse to shreds." A third: "I want to see her blood pouring down the gutters!"

When I spoke with Clinton recently about QAnon, she said, "I just get under their skin unlike *anybody else* … If I didn't have Secret Service protection going through my mail, finding weird stuff, tracking the threats against me—which are still very high—I would be worried." She has come to realize that the invented reality in which conspiracy theorists place her is not some bizarre parallel universe but actually one that shapes our own. Referring to internet trolling operations, Clinton said, "I don't think until relatively recently most people understood how well organized they were, and how many different components of their strategy they have put in place."

II. REVELATION

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ON OCTOBER 28, 2017, the anonymous user now widely referred to as "Q" appeared for the first time on 4chan, a so-called image board that is known for its grotesque memes, sickening photographs, and brutal teardown culture. Q predicted the imminent arrest of Hillary Clinton and a violent uprising nationwide, posting this:

> HRC extradition already in motion effective yesterday with several countries in case of cross border run. Passport approved to be flagged effective 10/30 @ 12:01am. Expect massive riots organized in defiance and others fleeing the US to occur. US M's will conduct the operation while NG activated. Proof check: Locate a NG member and ask if activated for duty 10/30 across most major cities.

And then this:

> Mockingbird HRC detained, not arrested (yet). Where is Huma? Follow Huma. This has nothing to do w/ Russia (yet). Why does Potus surround himself w/ generals? What is military intelligence? Why go around the 3 letter agencies? What Supreme Court case allows for the use of MI v Congressional assembled and approved agencies? Who has ultimate authority over our branches of military

> w/o approval conditions unless 90+ in wartime conditions? What is the military code? Where is AW being held? Why? POTUS will not go on tv to address nation. POTUS must isolate himself to prevent negative optics. POTUS knew removing criminal rogue elements as a first step was essential to free and pass legislation. Who has access to everything classified? Do you believe HRC, Soros, Obama etc have more power than Trump? Fantasy. Whoever controls the office of the Presidency controls this great land. They never believed for a moment they (Democrats and Republicans) would lose control. This is not a R v D battle. Why did Soros donate all his money recently? Why would he place all his funds in a RC? Mockingbird 10.30.17 God bless fellow Patriots.

Clinton was not arrested on October 30, but that didn't deter Q, who continued posting ominous predictions and cryptic riddles—with prompts like "Find the reflection inside the castle"—often written in the form of tantalizing fragments and rhetorical questions. Q made it clear that he wanted people to believe he was an intelligence officer or military official with Q clearance, a level of access to classified information that includes nuclear-weapons design and other highly sensitive material. (I'm using *he* because many Q followers do, though Q remains anonymous—hence "QAnon.") Q's tone is conspiratorial to the point of cliché: "I've said too much," and "Follow the money," and "Some things must remain classified to the very end."

What might have languished as a lonely screed on a single image board instead incited fervor. Its profile was enhanced, according to Brandy Zadrozny and Ben Collins of NBC News, by several conspiracy theorists whose promotion of Q in turn helped build up their own online profiles. By now, nearly three years since Q's original messages appeared, there have been thousands of what his followers call "Q drops"—messages posted to image boards by Q. He uses a password-protected "tripcode," a series of letters and numbers visible to other image-board users to signal the continuity of his identity over time. (Q's tripcode has changed on occasion, prompting flurries of speculation.) As Q has moved from one image board to the next—from 4chan to 8chan to 8kun, seeking a safe harbor—QAnon adherents have only become more devoted. If the internet is one big rabbit hole containing infinitely recursive rabbit holes, QAnon has somehow found its way down all of them, gulping up lesser conspiracy theories as it goes.

In its broadest contours, the QAnon belief system looks something like this: Q is an intelligence or military insider with proof that corrupt world leaders are secretly torturing children all over the world; the malefactors are embedded in the deep state; Donald Trump is working tirelessly to thwart them. ("These people need to ALL be ELIMINATED," Q wrote in one post.) The eventual destruction of the global cabal is imminent, Q prophesies, but can be accomplished only with the support of patriots who search for meaning in Q's clues. To believe Q requires rejecting mainstream institutions, ignoring government officials, battling apostates, and despising the press. One of Q's favorite rallying cries is "You are the news now." Another is "Enjoy the show," a phrase that his disciples regard as a reference to a coming apocalypse: When the world as we know it comes to an end, everyone's a spectator.

People who have taken Q to heart like to say they've been paying attention from the very beginning, the way someone might brag about having listened to Radiohead before *The Bends*. A promise of foreknowledge is part of Q's appeal, as is the feeling of being part of a secret community, which is reinforced through the use

of acronyms and ritual phrases such as “Nothing can stop what is coming” and “Trust the plan.”

One phrase that serves as a special touchstone among QAnon adherents is “the calm before the storm.” Q first used it a few days after his initial post, and it arrived with a specific history. On the evening of October 5, 2017—not long before Q first made himself known on 4chan—President Trump stood beside the first lady in a loose semicircle with 20 or so senior military leaders and their spouses for a photo in the State Dining Room at the White House. Reporters had been invited to watch as Trump’s guests posed and smiled. Trump couldn’t seem to stop talking. “You guys know what this represents?” he asked at one point, tracing an incomplete circle in the air with his right index finger. “Tell us, sir,” one onlooker replied. The president’s response was self-satisfied, bordering on a drawl: “Maybe it’s the calm before the storm.”

“What’s the storm?” one of the journalists asked.

“Could be the calm—the calm before the storm,” Trump said again. His repetition seemed to be for dramatic effect. The whir of camera shutters grew louder.

The reporters became insistent: “What storm, Mr. President?”

A curt response from Trump: “You’ll find out.”

Those 37 seconds of presidential ambiguity made headlines right away—relations with Iran had been tense in recent days—but they would also become foundational lore for eventual followers of Q. The president’s circular hand gesture is of particular interest to them. You may think he was motioning to the semicircle gathered around him, they say, but he was really drawing the letter *Q* in the air. Was Trump playing the role of John the Baptist, proclaiming what was to come? Was he himself the anointed one?

THE DESTRUCTION OF THE GLOBAL CABAL IS IMMINENT, Q PROPHESIES. ONE OF HIS FAVORITE RALLYING CRIES IS “ENJOY THE SHOW”—A REFERENCE TO A COMING APOCALYPSE.

It’s impossible to know the number of QAnon adherents with any precision, but the ranks are growing. At least 35 current or former congressional candidates have embraced Q, according to an online tally by the progressive nonprofit Media Matters for America. Those candidates have either directly praised QAnon in public or approvingly referenced QAnon slogans. (One Republican candidate for Congress, Matthew Lusk of Florida, includes QAnon under the “issues” section of his campaign website, posing the question: “Who is Q?”) QAnon has by now made its way onto every major social and commercial platform and any number of fringe sites. Tracy Diaz, a QAnon evangelist, known online by the name TracyBeanz, has 185,000 followers on Twitter and more than 100,000 YouTube subscribers. She helped lift QAnon from obscurity, facilitating its transition to mainstream social media. (A publicist described Diaz as “really private” and declined requests for an interview.) On TikTok, videos with the hashtag #QAnon have garnered millions of views. There are too many QAnon Facebook groups, plenty of them ghost towns, to do a proper count, but the most active ones publish thousands of items each day. (In 2018, Reddit banned QAnon groups from its platform for inciting violence.)

Adherents are ever looking out for signs from on high, plumbing for portents when guidance from Q himself is absent. The coronavirus, for instance—what does it signify? In several of the big Facebook groups, people erupted in a frenzy of speculation, circulating a theory that Trump’s decision to wear a yellow tie to a White House briefing about the virus was a sign that the outbreak wasn’t real: “He is telling us there is no virus threat because it is the exact same color as the maritime flag that represents the vessel has no infected people on board,” someone wrote in a post that was widely shared and remixed across social media. Three days before the World Health Organization officially declared the coronavirus a pandemic, Trump was retweeting a QAnon-themed meme. “Who knows what this means, but it sounds good to me!” the president wrote on March 8, sharing a Photoshopped image of himself playing a violin overlaid with the words “Nothing can stop what is coming.”

On March 9, Q himself issued a triptych of ominous posts that seemed definitive: The coronavirus is real, but welcome, and followers should not be afraid. The first post shared Trump’s tweet from the night before and repeated, “Nothing Can Stop What Is Coming.” The second said: “The Great Awakening is Worldwide.” The third was simple: “GOD WINS.”

A month later, on April 8, Q went on a posting spree, dropping nine posts over the span of six hours and touching on several of his favorite topics—God, Pizzagate, and the wickedness of the elites. “They will stop at nothing to regain power,” he wrote in one scathing post that alleged a coordinated propaganda effort by Democrats, Hollywood, and the media. Another accused Democrats of promoting “mass hysteria” about the coronavirus for political gain: “What is the primary benefit to keep public in mass-hysteria re: COVID-19? Think voting. Are you awake yet? Q.” And he shared these verses from Ephesians: “Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might. Put on the full armor of God so that you will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil.”

Anthony Fauci, the longtime director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, has become an object of scorn among QAnon supporters who don’t like the bad news he delivers or the way he has contradicted Trump publicly. In one March press conference, Trump referred to the State Department as the “Deep State Department,” and Fauci could be seen over the president’s shoulder, suppressing a laugh and covering his face. By then, QAnon had already declared Fauci irredeemably compromised, because WikiLeaks had unearthed a pair of emails he sent praising Hillary Clinton in 2012 and 2013. Sentiment about Fauci among QAnon supporters on social-media platforms ranges from “Fauci is a Deep State puppet” to “FAUCI is a BLACK-HAT!!!”—the term QAnon uses for people who support the evil cabal that Q warns about. One person, using the hashtags #DeepStateCabal and #Qanon, tweeted this: “Watch Fauci’s hand signals and body language at the press conferences. What is he communicating?” Another shared an image of Fauci standing in a lab with Barack Obama, with the caption “Obama and ‘Dr.’ Fauci in the lab creating coronovirus [*sic*]. #Deepstate-Doctor.” The Justice Department recently approved heightened security measures for Fauci because of the mounting volume of threats against him.

In the final days before Congress passed a $2 trillion economic-relief package in late March, Democrats insisted on provisions that would make it easier for people to vote by mail, prompting Q himself to weigh in with dismay: “These people are sick! Nothing can stop what is coming. Nothing.”

III. BELIEVERS

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ON A BONE-COLD THURSDAY in early January, a crowd was swelling in downtown Toledo, Ohio. By lunchtime, seven hours before the start of Trump’s first campaign rally of the new year, the line to get into the Huntington Center had already snaked around two city blocks. The air was electric with possibility, and the whole scene possessed a Jimmy Buffett–meets–Michigan Militia atmosphere: lots of white people, a good deal of vaping, red-white-and-blue everything. Down the street, someone had affixed a two-story banner across the top of a burned-out brick building. It read: PRESIDENT TRUMP, WELCOME TO TOLEDO, OHIO: WHO IS Q … MILITARY INTELLIGENCE? Q+? (“Q+” is QAnon shorthand for Trump himself.) Vendors at the event were selling Q buttons and T-shirts. QAnon merchandise comes in a great variety; online, you can buy Great Awakening coffee ($14.99) and QAnon bracelets with tiny silver pizza charms ($20.17).

I worked my way toward the back of the line, making small talk and asking who, if anyone, knew anything about QAnon. One woman’s eyes lit up, and in a single fluid motion she unzipped and removed her jacket, then did a little jump so that her back was to me. I could see a *Q* made out of duct tape, which she’d pressed onto her red T-shirt. Her name was Lorrie Shock, and the first thing she wanted me to know was this: “We’re not a domestic-terror group.”

Shock was born in Ohio and never left, “a lifer,” as she put it. She had worked at a Bridgestone factory, making car parts, for most of her adult life. “Real hot and dirty work, but good money,” she told me. “I got three kids through school.” Today, in what she calls her preretirement job, she cares for adults with special needs, spending her days in a tender routine of playing games with them and helping them in and out of a swimming pool. Shock came to the Trump rally with her friend Pat Harger, who had retired after 32 years at Whirlpool. Harger’s wife runs a catering business, which is what had kept her from attending the rally that day. Harger and Shock are old friends. “Since the fourth grade,” Harger told me, “and we’re 57 years old.”

Now that Shock’s girls are grown and she’s not working a factory job, she has more time for herself. That used to mean reading novels in the evening—she doesn’t own a television—but now it means researching Q, who first came to her notice when someone she knew mentioned him on Facebook in 2017: “What caught my attention was ‘research.’ *Do your own research. Don’t take anything for granted.* I don’t care who says it, even President Trump. Do your own research, make up your own mind.”

The QAnon universe is sprawling and deep, with layer upon layer of context, acronyms, characters, and shorthand to learn. The “castle” is the White House. “Crumbs” are clues. CBTS stands for “calm before the storm,” and WWG1WGA stands for “Where we go one, we go all,” which has become an expression of solidarity among Q followers. (Both of these phrases, oddly, are used in the trailer for the 1996 Ridley Scott film *White Squall*—watch it on YouTube, and you’ll see that the comments section is flooded with pro-Q sentiment.) There is also a “Q clock,” which refers to a calendar some factions of Q supporters use to try to decode supposed clues based on time stamps of Q drops and Trump tweets.

At the height of her devotion, Shock was spending four to six hours a day reading and rereading Q drops, scouring documents online, taking notes. Now, she says, she spends closer to an hour or two a day. “When I first started, everybody thought I was crazy,” Shock said. That included her daughters, who are “very liberal Hillary and Bernie supporters,” Shock said. “I still love them. They think I’m crazy, but that’s all right.”

Harger, too, once thought Shock had lost it. “I was doubting her,” he told me. “I would send her texts saying, *Lorrie*.”

“He was like, ‘What the hell?’” Shock said, laughing. “So my comment to him would be ‘Do your own research.’”

“And I did,” Harger said. “And it’s like, *Wow*.”

Taking a page from Trump’s playbook, Q frequently rails against legitimate sources of information as fake. Shock and Harger rely on information they encounter on Facebook rather than news outlets run by journalists. They don’t read the local paper or watch any of the major television networks. “You can’t watch the news,” Shock said. “Your news channel ain’t gonna tell us shit.” Harger says he likes One America News Network. Not so long ago, he used to watch CNN, and couldn’t get enough of Wolf Blitzer. “We were glued to that; we always have been,” he said. “Until this man, Trump, really opened our eyes to what’s happening. And Q. Q is telling us beforehand the stuff that’s going to happen.” I asked Harger and Shock for examples of predictions that had come true. They could not provide specifics and instead encouraged me to do the research myself. When I asked them how they explained the events Q had predicted that never happened, such as Clinton’s arrest, they said that deception is part of Q’s plan. Shock added, “I think there were more things that were predicted that *did* happen.” Her tone was gentle rather than indignant.

Harger wanted me to know that he'd voted for Obama the first time around. He grew up in a family of Democrats. His dad was a union guy. But that was before Trump appeared and convinced Harger that he shouldn't trust the institutions he always thought he could. Shock nodded alongside him. "The reason I feel like I can trust Trump more is, he's not part of the establishment," she said. At one point, Harger told me I should look into what happened to John F. Kennedy Jr.—who died in 1999, when his airplane crashed into the Atlantic Ocean off Martha's Vineyard—suggesting that Hillary Clinton had had him assassinated. (Alternatively, a contingent of QAnon believers say that JFK Jr. faked his death and that he's a behind-the-scenes Trump supporter, and possibly even Q himself. Some anticipate his dramatic public return so that he can serve as Trump's running mate in 2020.) When I asked Harger whether there's any evidence to support the assassination claim, he flipped my question around: "Is there any evidence not to?"

Reading Shock's Facebook page is an exercise in contradictions, a toggling between banality and hostility. There she is in a yellow kayak in her profile photo, bright-red hair spilling out of a ski hat, a giant smile on her face. There are the photos of her daughters, and of a granddaughter with Shirley Temple curls. Yet Q is never far away. On Christmas Eve, Shock shared one post that seemed to come straight out of the QAnon universe but also pulled in an older, classic conspiracy: "X marks the spot over Roswell NM. X17 Fifth Force Particle. X + Q Coincidence?" That same day, she shared a separate post suggesting that Michelle Obama is secretly a man. Someone responded with skepticism: "I am still not convinced. She shows and acts evil, but a man?" Shock's reply: "Research it." There was a post claiming that Representative Adam Schiff had raped the body of a dead boy at the Chateau Marmont, in Los Angeles—Harger shows up here, with a "huh??" in the comments—and a warning that George Soros was going after Christian evangelicals. In other posts, Shock playfully taunted "libs" and her "Trump-hating friends," and also shared a video of her daughter singing Christmas carols.

In Toledo, I asked Shock if she had any theories about Q's identity. She answered immediately: "I think it's Trump." I asked if she thinks Trump even knows how to use 4chan. The message board is notoriously confusing for the uninitiated, nothing like Facebook and other social platforms designed to make it easy to publish quickly and often. "I think he knows way more than what we think," she said. But she also wanted me to know that her obsession with Q wasn't about Trump. This had been something she was reluctant to speak about at first. Now, she said, "I feel God led me to Q. I really feel like God pushed me in this direction. I feel like if it was deceitful, in my spirit, God would be telling me, 'Enough's enough.' But I don't feel that. I pray about it. I've said, 'Father, should I be wasting my time on this?' … And I don't feel that feeling of *I should stop*."

Arthur Jones, the director of the documentary film *Feels Good Man*, which tells the story of how internet memes infiltrated politics in the 2016 presidential election, told me that QAnon reminds him of his childhood growing up in an evangelical-Christian family in the Ozarks. He said that many people he knew then, and many people he meets now in the most devout parts of the country, are deeply interested in the Book of Revelation, and in trying to unpack "all of its pretty-hard-to-decipher prophecies." Jones went on: "I think the same kind of person would all of a sudden start pulling at the threads of Q and start feeling like everything is starting to fall into place and make sense. If you are an evangelical and you look at Donald Trump on face value, he lies, he steals, he cheats, he's been married multiple times, he's clearly a sinner. But you are trying to find a way that he is somehow part of God's plan."

You can't always tell what kind of Q follower you're encountering. Anyone using a Q hashtag could be a true believer, like Shock, or simply someone cruising a site and playing along for a vicarious thrill. Surely there are people who know that Q is a fantasy but participate because there's an element of QAnon that converges with a live-action role-playing game. In the sprawling constellation of Q supporters, Shock and Harger seem prototypical. They happened upon Q and something clicked. The fable plugged neatly into their existing worldview.

IV. PROFESSIONALS

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Q MAY BE ANONYMOUS, but leaders of the QAnon movement have emerged in public and built their own large audiences. David Hayes is better known by his online handle: PrayingMedic. In his YouTube videos, he exudes the even-keeled authoritarian energy of a middle-school principal. PrayingMedic is one of the best-known QAnon evangelists on the planet. He has more than 300,000 Twitter followers and a similar number of YouTube subscribers. Hayes, a former paramedic, lives in a terra-cotta-roofed subdivision in Gilbert, Arizona, with his wife, Denise, an artist whom he met on the dating site Christian Mingle in 2007. Both describe themselves as former atheists who came to their faith in God, and to each other, late in life, after previous marriages. Hayes has been following Q since the beginning, or close to it. "Q Anon is pretty darn interesting," he wrote on his Facebook page on December 12, 2017, six weeks after Q's first post on 4chan. That same day, he wrote about a sudden calling he felt:

> My dreams have suggested that God wants me to keep my attention focused on politics and current events. After some prayer, I've decided to do a regular news and current events show on Periscope. I'm trying to do one broadcast a day. (The videos are also being posted to my Youtube channel.) That is all.

Hayes is a superstar in the Q universe. His video "Q for Beginners Part 1" has been viewed more than 1 million times. "Some of the people who follow Q would consider themselves to be conspiracy theorists," Hayes says in the video. "I do not consider myself to be a conspiracy theorist. I consider myself to be a Q researcher. I don't have anything against people who like to follow conspiracies. That's their thing. It's not my thing."

Hayes has developed a following in part because of his sheer ubiquity but also because he skillfully wears the mantle of a skeptic—*I'm not one of those crazies*. Hayes is not a QAnon hobbyist, though. He's a professional. There are income streams to be tapped, modest but expanding. On Amazon, Hayes's book *Calm Before the Storm*, the first in what he says could easily be a 10-book series of "Q Chronicles," sells for $15.29. Hayes writes in the introduction that he and Denise have devoted their attention full-time to QAnon since 2017. "Denise and I have been blessed by those who have helped support us while we set aside our usual work to research Q's messages," he wrote. He has published several other books, which offer a glimpse into an earlier life. The titles include *Hearing God's Voice Made Simple*, *Defeating Your Adversary in the Court of Heaven*, and *American Sniper: Lessons in Spiritual Warfare*. Hayes registered Praying Medic as a religious nonprofit in Washington State in 2018.

"I FEEL GOD LED ME TO Q. I REALLY FEEL LIKE GOD PUSHED ME IN THIS DIRECTION."

Hayes tells his followers that he thinks Q is an open-source intelligence operation, made possible by the internet and designed by patriots fighting corruption inside the intelligence community. His interpretation of Q is ultimately religious in nature, and centers on the idea of a Great Awakening. "I believe *The Great Awakening* has a double application," Hayes wrote in a blog post in November 2019.

> It speaks of an intellectual awakening—the awareness by the public to the truth that we've been enslaved in a corrupt political system. But the exposure of the unimaginable depravity of the elites will lead to an increased awareness of our own depravity. Self-awareness of sin is fertile ground for spiritual revival. I believe the long-prophesied spiritual awakening lies on the other side of the storm.

Q followers agree that a Great Awakening lies ahead, and will bring salvation. They differ in their personal preoccupations with respect to the here and now. Some in the QAnon world are highly focused on what they perceive as degeneracy in the mainstream media, a perception fueled in equal measure by Q and by Trump. Others obsess over the intelligence community and the notion of a deep state. An active subsection of Q followers probes the Jeffrey Epstein case. There are those who claim knowledge of a 16-year plan by Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama to destroy the United States by means of mass drought, weaponized disease, food shortages, and nuclear war. During the investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election, some Q followers promoted the idea that Trump was secretly working with Robert Mueller, and that the special counsel's report would both exonerate Trump and lead to mass arrests of members of the corrupt cabal. (The eventual Mueller report, released in April 2019, neither exonerated Trump nor led to mass arrests.)

These divergent byways are elemental to QAnon's staying power—this is a very welcoming belief system, warm in its tolerance for contradiction—and are also what makes it possible for a practical man like Hayes to play the role that he does. QAnon is complex and confusing. People from all over the internet seek guidance from someone who seems levelheaded. (Hayes was quick to respond to my emails but declined requests for an interview. He complained to me that journalists refuse to see QAnon for what it really is, and therefore cannot be trusted.)

The most prominent QAnon figures have a presence beyond the biggest social-media platforms and image boards. The Q universe encompasses numerous blogs, proprietary websites, and types of chat software, as well as alternative social-media platforms such as Gab, the site known for anti-Semitism and white nationalism, where many people banned from Twitter have congregated. Vloggers and bloggers promote their Patreon accounts, where people can pay them in monthly sums. There's also money to be made from ads on YouTube. That seems to be the primary focus for Hayes, whose videos have been viewed more than 33 million times altogether. His "Q for Beginners" video includes ads from companies such as the vacation-rental site Vrbo and from *The Epoch Times*, an international pro-Trump newspaper. Q evangelists have taken a "publish everywhere" approach that is half outreach, half redundancy. If one platform cracks down on QAnon, as Reddit did, they won't have to start from scratch somewhere else. Already embroiled in the battle between good and evil, QAnon has involved itself in another battle—between the notion of an open web for the people and a gated internet controlled by a powerful few.

V. WHO IS Q?

ANY NEW BELIEF SYSTEM runs into opposition. In December 2018, Matt Patten, a veteran SWAT-team sergeant in the Broward County Sheriff's Office, in Florida, was photographed with Vice President Mike Pence on an airport tarmac. Patten wore a patch on his tactical vest that bore the letter *Q*. The photograph was tweeted by the vice president's office and then went viral in the QAnon community. The tweet was quickly taken down. Patten was demoted. When I knocked on his door on a gloomy day in August, no one answered. But as I turned to leave, I noticed two

large bumper stickers on the white mailbox out front. One said TRUMP, and the other said #QANON: PATRIOTS FIGHT.

Late last summer, Q himself lost his platform. He had migrated from 4chan (fearing that the site had been "infiltrated") to the image board 8chan, and then 8chan went dark. Three days before I stood on Patten's doorstep, 22 people had been killed in a mass shooting at a Walmart in El Paso, Texas, and police revealed that the alleged killer had posted a manifesto on 8chan just before carrying out the attack. The episode had eerie similarities to two other shootings. Four months earlier, in April 2019, the suspected shooter in a murderous rampage at a synagogue in Poway, California, had posted an anti-Semitic letter on 8chan. Weeks before that, the man who killed 51 worshippers at two New Zealand mosques had posted a white-supremacist manifesto on 8chan.

After El Paso, 8chan's owner, Jim Watkins, was ordered to testify before the House Committee on Homeland Security. Watkins had bought the site four years earlier from its founder, Fredrick Brennan, now 26, who eventually cut all ties to 8chan. "Regrettably, this is at least the third act of white supremacist extremist violence linked to your website this year," wrote Representatives Bennie Thompson, a Democrat from Mississippi, and Mike Rogers, a Republican from Alabama, when they summoned Watkins to Capitol Hill. "Americans deserve to know what, if anything, you, as the owner and operator, are doing to address the proliferation of extremist content on 8chan."

8chan had already lost crucial services, which had forced it to shut down. The CEO of Cloudflare, which had helped protect the site from cyberattacks, explained his decision to drop 8chan in an open letter after the El Paso shooting: "The rationale is simple: They have proven themselves to be lawless and that lawlessness has caused multiple tragic deaths." Watkins promised to keep the site off the internet until after his congressional appearance. He is a former U.S. Army helicopter repairman who got into the business of websites while he was still in the military. Among other things, in 1997, he launched a successful porn site called Asian Bikini Bar. On his YouTube channel, where he posts under the username Watkins Xerxes, he frequently sings hymns, reads verses from the Bible, praises Trump, and touches on themes underlying QAnon—warning against the deep state and reminding his audience members that they are now "the actual reporting mechanism of the news." He also shows off his fountain-pen collection and practices yoga. When he arrived on Capitol Hill, in September 2019, Watkins wore a bulbous silver Q pinned to his collar. His testimony was behind closed doors. In November, 8chan flickered back to life as 8kun. It was sporadically accessible, limping along through a series of cyberattacks. It received assistance from a Russian hosting service that is typically associated with spreading malware. When Q reappeared on 8kun, he used the same tripcode that he had used on 8chan. He posted other hints meant to verify the continuity of his identity, including an image of a notebook and a pen that had appeared in earlier posts.

Fredrick Brennan's theory is that Jim and his son Ron, who is the site's administrator, knew 8kun needed Q to attract users. "I definitely, definitely, 100 percent believe that Q either knows Jim or Ron Watkins, or was hired by Jim or Ron Watkins," Brennan told me. Jim and Ron have both denied knowing Q's identity. “I don’t know who Q is,” Ron told me in a direct message on Twitter. Jim told an interviewer on One America News Network in September 2019: “I don’t know who QAnon is. Really, we run an anonymous website.” Both insist that they care about maintaining 8kun only because it is a platform for unfettered free speech. “8kun is like a piece of paper, and the users decide what is written on it,” Ron told me. “There are many different topics and users from many different backgrounds.” But their interest in Q is well documented. In February, Jim started a super PAC called Disarm the Deep State, which echoes Q’s messages and which is running paid ads on 8kun.

Brennan has long been feuding with the Watkinses. Jim is suing Brennan for libel in the Philippines, where they both lived until recently, and Brennan is actively fighting Jim’s attempts to become a naturalized citizen there. “They kept Q alive,” Brennan told me. “We wouldn’t be talking about this right now if Q didn’t go on the new 8kun. The entire reason we’re talking about this is they’re directly related to Q. And, you know, I worry constantly that there is going to be, as early as November 2020, some kind of shooting or something related to Q if Trump loses. Or parents killing their children to save them from the hell-world that is to come because the deep state has won. These are real possibilities. I just feel like what they have done is totally irresponsible to keep Q going.”

The story of Q is premised on the need for Q to remain anonymous. It’s why Q originally picked 4chan, one of the last places built for anonymity on the social web. “I’ve often related Q to previous figures like John Titor or Satoshi Nakamoto,” Brennan told me, referring to two legends of internet anonymity. Satoshi Nakamoto is the name used by the unknown creator of bitcoin. John Titor is the name used on several message boards in 2000 and 2001 by someone claiming to be a military time traveler from the year 2036.

QAnon adherents see Q’s anonymity as proof of Q’s credibility—despite their deep mistrust of unnamed sources in the media. Every faction of QAnon has its own hunches, alliances, and interpersonal dramas related to the question of Q’s identity. The theories fit into three broad groups. In the first group are theories that assume Q is a single individual who has been posting all alone this entire time. This is where you’ll find the people who say that Trump himself is Q, or even that PrayingMedic is Q. (This category also includes the possibility, raised by people outside of QAnon, that Q is a lone Trump supporter who started posting as a form of fan fiction, not realizing it would take off; and the idea that Q began posting in order to parody Trump and his supporters, not anticipating that people would take him seriously.) The second group of theories holds that the original Q posted continuously for a while, but then something changed. This second category includes Brennan’s idea that the Watkinses are now paying Q, or are paying someone to carry on as Q, or are even acting as Q themselves. The third group of theories holds that Q is a collective, with a small number of people sharing access to the account. This third category includes the notion that Q is a new kind of open-source military-intelligence agency.

Many QAnon adherents see significance in Trump tweets containing words that begin with the letter *Q*. Recent world events have rewarded them amply. “I am a great friend and admirer of the Queen & the United Kingdom,” Trump began one tweet on March 29. The day before, he had tweeted this: “I am giving consideration to a QUARANTINE.” The Q crowd seized on both tweets, arguing that if you ignore most of the letters in the messages, you’ll find a confession from Trump: “I am … Q.”

VI. REASON VERSUS FAITH

VI. REASON VERSUS FAITH

IN A MIAMI COFFEE SHOP last year, I met with a man who has gotten a flurry of attention in recent years for his research on conspiracy theories—a political-science professor at the University of Miami named Joseph Uscinski. I have known Uscinski for years, and his views are nuanced, deeply informed, and far from anything you would consider knee-jerk partisanship. Many people assume, he told me, that a propensity for conspiracy thinking is predictable along ideological lines. That’s wrong, he explained. It’s better to think of conspiracy thinking as independent of party politics. It’s a particular form of mind-wiring. And it’s generally characterized by acceptance of the following propositions: Our lives are controlled by plots hatched in secret places. Although we ostensibly live in a democracy, a small group of people run everything, but we don’t know who they are. When big events occur—pandemics, recessions, wars, terrorist attacks—it is because that secretive group is working against the rest of us.

QAnon isn’t a far-right conspiracy, the way it’s often described, Uscinski went on, despite its obviously pro-Trump narrative. And that’s because Trump isn’t a typical far-right politician. Q appeals to people with the greatest attraction to conspiracy thinking of any kind, and that appeal crosses ideological lines.

Many of the people most prone to believing conspiracy theories see themselves as victim-warriors fighting against corrupt and powerful forces. They share a hatred of mainstream elites. That helps explain why cycles of populism and conspiracy thinking seem to rise and fall together. Conspiracy thinking is at once a cause and a consequence of what Richard Hofstadter in 1964 famously described as “the paranoid style” in American politics. But do not make the mistake of thinking that conspiracy theories are scribbled only in the marginalia of American history. They color every major news event: the assassination of John F. Kennedy, the moon landing, 9/11. They have helped sustain consequential eruptions, such as McCarthyism in the 1950s and anti-Semitism at any moment you choose. But QAnon is different. It may be propelled by paranoia and populism, but it is also propelled by religious faith. The language of evangelical Christianity has come to define the Q movement. QAnon marries an appetite for the conspiratorial with positive beliefs about a radically different and better future, one that is preordained.

That was part of the reason Uscinski’s mother, Shelly, 62, was attracted to QAnon. Shelly, who lives in New Hampshire, was tooling around on YouTube a couple of years ago, looking for how-to videos—she can't remember for what, exactly, maybe a tutorial on how to get her car windows sparkling-clean—and the algorithm served up QAnon. She remembers a feeling of magnetic attraction. "Like, *Wow, what is this?*" she recalled when I spoke with her by phone. "For me, it was revealing some things that maybe I was hoping would come to pass." She sensed that Q knew her anxieties—as if someone was taking her train of thought and "actually verbalizing it." Shelly's frustrations are broad, and directed primarily at the institutions she sees as broken. She's fed up with the education system, the financial system, the media. "Even our churches are out of whack," she said. One of the things that resonated most with her about Q was his disgust with "the fake news." She gets her information mostly from Fox News, Twitter, and the *New Hampshire Union Leader*. "In my lifetime, I guess, things have gotten progressively worse," Shelly said. She added a little later: "Q gives us hope. And it's a good thing, to be hopeful."

Shelly likes that Q occasionally quotes from scripture, and she likes that he encourages people to pray. In the end, she said, QAnon is about something so much bigger than Trump or anyone else. "There are QAnon followers out there," Shelly said, "who suggest that what we're going through now, in this crazy political realm we're in now, with all of the things that are happening worldwide, is very biblical, and that this is Armageddon."

I asked her if she thinks the end of the world is upon us. "It wouldn't surprise me," she said.

Joseph Uscinski is disturbed by his mother's belief in QAnon. He's not comfortable talking about it. And Shelly doesn't quite appreciate the irony of the family's situation, because she doesn't believe QAnon is a form of conspiracy thinking in the first place. At one point in our conversation, when I referred to QAnon as a conspiracy theory, she quickly interrupted: "It's not a theory. It's the foretelling of things to come." She laughed hard when I asked if she had ever tried to get Joseph to believe in QAnon. The answer was an unequivocal no: "I'm his mom, so I love him."

VII. APOCALYPSE

WATCHKEEPERS FOR THE End of Days can easily find signs of impending doom—in comets and earthquakes, in wars and pandemics. It has always been this way. In 1831, a Baptist preacher in rural New York named William Miller began to publicly share his prediction that the Second Coming of Jesus was imminent. Eventually he settled on a date: October 22, 1844. When the sun came up on October 23, his followers, known as the Millerites, were crushed. The episode would come to be known as the Great Disappointment. But they did not give up. The Millerites became the Adventists, who in turn became the Seventh-day Adventists, who now have a worldwide membership of more than 20 million. "These people in the QAnon community—I feel like they are as deeply delusional, as deeply invested in their beliefs, as the Millerites were," Travis View, one of the hosts of a podcast called *QAnon Anonymous*, which subjects QAnon to acerbic analysis, told me. "That makes me pretty confident that this is not something that is going to go away with the end of the Trump presidency."

QAnon carries on a tradition of apocalyptic thinking that has spanned thousands of years. It offers a polemic to empower those who feel adrift. In his classic 1957 book, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, the historian Norman Cohn examined the emergence of apocalyptic thinking over many centuries. He found one common condition: This way of thinking consistently emerged in regions where rapid social and economic change was taking place—and at periods of time when displays of spectacular wealth were highly visible but unavailable to most people. This was true in Europe during the Crusades in the 11th century, and during the Black Death in the 14th century, and in the Rhine Valley in the 16th century, and in William Miller's New York in the 19th century. It is true in America in the 21st century.

QANON CARRIES ON A TRADITION OF APOCALYPTIC THINKING THAT HAS SPANNED THOUSANDS OF YEARS. IT OFFERS A POLEMIC TO EMPOWER THOSE WHO FEEL ADRIFT.

The Seventh-day Adventists and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are thriving religious movements indigenous to America. Do not be surprised if QAnon becomes another. It already has more adherents by far than either of those two denominations had in the first decades of their existence. People are expressing their faith through devoted study of Q drops as installments of a foundational text, through the development of Q-worshipping groups, and through sweeping expressions of gratitude for what Q has brought to their lives. Does it matter that we do not know who Q is? The divine is always a mystery. Does it matter that basic aspects of Q's teachings cannot be confirmed? The basic tenets of Christianity cannot be confirmed. Among the people of QAnon, faith remains absolute. True believers describe a feeling of rebirth, an irreversible arousal to existential knowledge. They are certain that a Great Awakening is coming. They'll wait as long as they must for deliverance.

Trust the plan. Enjoy the show. Nothing can stop what is coming.

Adrienne LaFrance is the executive editor of The Atlantic.

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The 2016 Election Was Just a Dry Run

By Franklin Foer

Russia's goal was never merely to elect Donald Trump. It was to bring down American democracy. Is Vladimir Putin poised to complete the mission he began four years ago?

ILLUSTRATION BY TIMO LENZEN

Jack Cable sat down at the desk in his cramped dorm room

to become an adult in the eyes of democracy. The rangy teenager, with neatly manicured brown hair and chunky glasses, had recently arrived at Stanford—his first semester of life away from home—and the 2018 midterm elections were less than two months away. Although he wasn't one for covering his laptop with strident stickers or for taking loud stands, he felt a genuine thrill at the prospect of voting. But before he could cast an absentee ballot, he needed to register with the Board of Elections back home in Chicago.

When Cable tried to complete the digital forms, an error message stared at him from his browser. Clicking back to his initial entry, he realized that he had accidentally typed an extraneous quotation mark into his home address. The fact that a single keystroke had short-circuited his registration filled Cable with a sense of dread.

Despite his youth, Cable already enjoyed a global reputation as a gifted hacker—or, as he is prone to clarify, an "ethical hacker." As a sophomore in high school, he had started participating in "bug bounties," contests in which companies such as Google and Uber publicly invite attacks on their digital infrastructure so that they can identify and patch vulnerabilities before malicious actors can exploit them. Cable, who is preternaturally persistent, had a knack for finding these soft spots. He collected enough cash prizes from the bug bounties to cover the costs of four years at Stanford.

Though it wouldn't have given the average citizen a moment of pause, Cable recognized the error message on the Chicago Board of Elections website as a telltale sign of a gaping hole in its security. It suggested that the site was vulnerable to those with less beneficent intentions than his own, that they could read and perhaps even alter databases listing the names and addresses of voters in the country's third-largest city. Despite his technical savvy, Cable was at a loss for how to alert the authorities. He began sending urgent warnings about the problem to every official email address he could find. Over the course of the next seven months, he tried to reach the city's chief information officer, the Illinois governor's office, and the Department of Homeland Security.

As he waited for someone to take notice of his missives, Cable started to wonder whether the rest of America's electoral infrastructure was as weak as Chicago's. He read about how, in 2016, when he was a junior in high school, Russian military intelligence—known by its initials, GRU—had hacked the Illinois State Board of Elections website, transferring the personal data of tens of thousands of voters to Moscow. The GRU had even tunneled into the computers of a small Florida company that sold software to election officials in eight states.

Out of curiosity, Cable checked to see what his home state had done to protect itself in the years since. Within 15 minutes of poking around the Board of Elections website, he discovered that its old weaknesses had not been fully repaired. These were the most basic lapses in cybersecurity—preventable with code learned in an introductory computer-science class—and they remained even though similar gaps had been identified by the FBI and the Department of Homeland Security, not to mention widely reported in the media. The Russians could have strolled through the same door as they had in 2016.

Between classes, Cable began running tests on the rest of the national electoral infrastructure. He found that some states now had formidable defenses, but many others were like Illinois. If a teenager in a dorm room—even an exceptionally talented one—could find these vulnerabilities, they were not going to be missed by a disciplined unit of hackers that has spent years studying these networks, a unit with the resources of a powerful nation bent on discrediting an American election.

#DemocracyRIP was both the hashtag and the plan. The Russians were expecting the election of Hillary Clinton—and preparing to immediately declare it a fraud. The embassy in Washington had attempted to persuade American officials to allow its functionaries to act as observers in polling places. A Twitter campaign alleging voting irregularities was queued. Russian diplomats were ready to publicly denounce the results as illegitimate. Events in 2016, of course, veered in the other direction. Yet the hashtag is worth pausing over for a moment, because, though it was never put to its intended use, it remains an apt title for a mission that is still unfolding.

Russia's interference in the last presidential election is among the most closely studied phenomena in recent American history, having been examined by Special Counsel Robert Mueller and his prosecutors, by investigators working for congressional committees, by teams within Facebook and Twitter, by seemingly every think tank with access to a printing press. It's possible, however,

Less than six months before Election Day, the government will attempt to identify democracy's most glaring weakness by deploying college kids on their summer break.

to mistake a plot point—the manipulation of the 2016 election—for the full sweep of the narrative.

Events in the United States have unfolded more favorably than any operative in Moscow could have ever dreamed: Not only did Russia's preferred candidate win, but he has spent his first term fulfilling the potential it saw in him, discrediting American institutions, rending the seams of American culture, and isolating a nation that had styled itself as indispensable to the free world. But instead of complacently enjoying its triumph, Russia almost immediately set about replicating it. Boosting the Trump campaign was a tactic; #DemocracyRIP remains the larger objective.

In the week that followed Donald Trump's election, Russia used its fake accounts on social media to organize a rally in New York City supporting the president-elect—and another rally in New York decrying him. Hackers continued attempting to break into state voting systems; trolls continued to launch social-media campaigns intended to spark racial conflict. Through subsidiaries, the Russian government continued to funnel cash to viral-video channels with names like In the Now and ICYMI, which build audiences with ephemera ("Man Licks Store Shelves in Online Post"), then hit unsuspecting readers with arguments about Syria and the CIA. This winter, the Russians even secured airtime for their overt propaganda outlet Sputnik on three radio stations in Kansas, bringing the network's drive-time depictions of American hypocrisy to the heartland.

While the Russians continued their efforts to undermine American democracy, the United States belatedly began to devise a response. Across government—if not at the top of it—there was a panicked sense that American democracy required new layers of defense. Senators drafted legislation with grandiose titles; bureaucrats unfurled the blueprints for new units and divisions; law enforcement assigned bodies to dedicated task forces. Yet many of the warnings have gone unheeded, and what fortifications have been built appear inadequate.

Jack Cable is a small emblem of how the U.S. government has struggled to outpace the Russians. After he spent the better part of a semester shouting into the wind, officials in Chicago and in the governor's office finally took notice of his warnings and repaired their websites. Cable may have a further role to play in defending America's election infrastructure. He is part of a team of competitive hackers at Stanford—national champions three years running—that caught the attention of Alex Stamos, a former head of security at Facebook, who now teaches at the university. Earlier this year, Stamos asked the Department of Homeland Security if he could pull together a group of undergraduates, Cable included, to lend Washington a hand in the search for bugs. "It's talent, but unrefined talent," Stamos told me. DHS, which has an acute understanding of the problem at hand but limited resources to solve it, accepted Stamos's offer. Less than six months before Election Day, the government will attempt to identify democracy's most glaring weakness by deploying college kids on their summer break.

Despite such well-intentioned efforts, the nation's vulnerabilities have widened, not narrowed, during the past four years. Our politics are even more raw and fractured than in 2016; our faith in government—and, perhaps, democracy itself—is further strained. The coronavirus may meaningfully exacerbate these problems; at a minimum, the pandemic is leeching attention and resources from election defense. The president, meanwhile, has dismissed Russian interference as a hoax and fired or threatened intelligence officials who have contradicted that narrative, all while professing his affinity for the very man who ordered this assault on American democracy. Fiona Hill, the scholar who served as the top Russia expert on Trump's National Security Council, told me, "The fact that they faced so little consequence for their action gives them little reason to stop."

The Russians have learned much about American weaknesses, and how to exploit them. Having probed state voting systems far more extensively than is generally understood by the public, they are now surely more capable of mayhem on Election Day—and possibly without leaving a detectable trace of their handiwork. Having hacked into the inboxes of political operatives in the U.S. and abroad, they've pioneered new techniques for infiltrating campaigns and disseminating their stolen goods. Even as to disinformation, the best-known and perhaps most overrated of their tactics, they have innovated, finding new ways to manipulate Americans and to poison the nation's politics. Russia's interference in 2016 might be remembered as the experimental prelude that foreshadowed the attack of 2020.

1. Hack the Vote

When officials arrived at work on the morning of May 22, 2014, three days before a presidential election, they discovered that their hard drives were fried. Hours earlier, pro-Kremlin hackers had taken a digital sledgehammer to a vital piece of Ukraine's democratic infrastructure, the network that collects vote tallies from across the nation. After finishing the task, they taunted their victim, posting photos of an election commissioner's renovated bathroom and his wife's passport.

Relying on a backup system, the Ukrainians were able to resuscitate their network. But on election night the attacks persisted. Hackers sent Russian journalists a link to a chart they had implanted on the official website of Ukraine's Central Election Commission. The graphic purported to show that a right-wing nationalist had sprinted to the lead in the presidential race. Although the public couldn't access the chart, Russian state television flashed the forged results on its highly watched newscast.

If the attack on Ukraine represented something like all-out digital war, Russia's hacking of the United States' electoral system two years later was more like a burglar going house to house jangling doorknobs. The Russians had the capacity to cause far greater damage than they did—at the very least to render Election Day a chaotic mess—but didn't act on it, because they deemed such an operation either unnecessary or not worth the cost. The U.S. intelligence community has admitted that it's not entirely sure why Russia sat on its hands. One theory holds that Barack Obama forced Russian restraint when he pulled Vladimir Putin aside at the end of the G20 Summit in Hangzhou, China, on September 5, 2016. With only interpreters present, Obama delivered a carefully worded admonition not to mess with the integrity of the election. By design, he didn't elaborate any specific consequence for ignoring his warning.

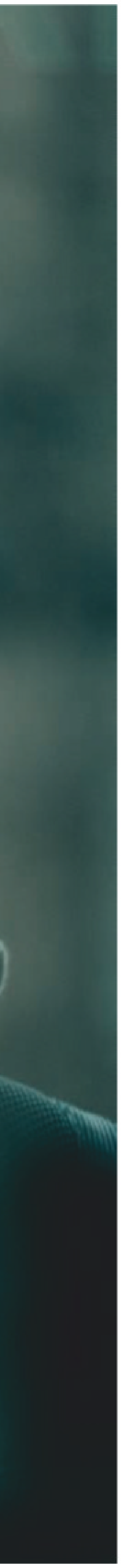
Perhaps the warning was heeded. The GRU kept on probing voting systems through the month of October, however, and there are other, more ominous explanations for Russia's apparent restraint. Michael Daniel, who served as the cybersecurity coordinator on Obama's National Security Council, told the Senate Intelligence Committee that the Russians were, in essence, casing the joint. They were gathering intelligence about the digital networks that undergird American elections and putting together a map so that they "could come back later and actually execute an operation."

What sort of operation could Russia execute in 2020? Unlike Ukraine, the United States doesn't have a central node that, if struck, could disable democracy at its core. Instead, the United States has an array of smaller but still alluring targets: the vendors, niche companies, that sell voting equipment to states and localities; the employees of those governments, each with passwords that can be stolen; voting machines that connect to the internet to transmit election results.

Matt Masterson is a senior adviser at the Department of Homeland Security's freshly minted Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, a bureau assigned to help states protect elections from outside attack; it's where Jack Cable will work this summer. I asked Masterson to describe the scenarios that keep him up at night. His greatest fear is that an election official might inadvertently enable a piece of ransomware. These are malicious bits of code that encrypt data and files, essentially placing a lock on a system; money is then demanded in exchange for the key. In 2017, Ukraine was targeted again, this time with a similar piece of malware called NotPetya. But instead of extorting Ukraine, Russia sought to cripple it. NotPetya wiped 10 percent of the nation's computers; it disabled ATMs, telephone networks, and banks. (The United States is well aware of NotPetya's potency, because it relied on a tool created by—and stolen from—the

Jack Cable, photographed in Chicago in April. The Stanford undergraduate found that dangerous vulnerabilities in Illinois's electoral infrastructure had not been repaired after 2016.

PHOTOGRAPH BY DAVID KASNIC



National Security Agency.) If the Russians attached such a bug to a voter-registration database, they could render an entire election logistically unfeasible; tracking who had voted and where they'd voted would be impossible.

But Russia need not risk such a devastating attack. It can simply meddle with voter-registration databases, which are filled with vulnerabilities similar to the ones that Cable exposed. Such meddling could stop short of purging voters from the rolls and still cause significant disruptions: Hackers could flip the digits in addresses, so that voters' photo IDs no longer match the official records. When people arrived at the polls, they would likely still be able to vote, but might be forced to cast provisional ballots. The confusion and additional paperwork would generate long lines and stoke suspicion about the underlying integrity of the election.

Given the fragility of American democracy, even the tiniest interference, or hint of interference, could undermine faith in the tally of the vote. On Election Night, the Russians could place a page on the Wisconsin Elections Commission website that falsely showed Trump with a sizable lead. Government officials would be forced to declare it a hoax. Imagine how Twitter demagogues, the president among them, would exploit the ensuing confusion.

Such scenarios ought to have sparked a clamor for systemic reform. But in the past, when the federal government has pointed out these vulnerabilities—and attempted to protect against them—the states have chafed and moaned. In August 2016, President Obama's homeland-security secretary, Jeh Johnson, held a conference call with state election officials and informed them of the need to safeguard their infrastructure. Instead of accepting his offer of help, they told him, "This is our responsibility and there should not be a federal takeover of the election system."

After the 2016 election, the federal government could have taken a stronger hand with localities. Unprecedented acts of foreign interference presumably would have provided quite a bit of leverage. That did not happen. The president perceives any suggestion of Russian interference as the diminution of his own legitimacy. This has contributed to a conspiracy of silence about the events of 2016. A year after the election, the Department of Homeland Security told 21 states that Russia had attempted to hack their electoral systems. Two years later, a Senate report publicly disclosed that Russia had, in fact, targeted all 50 states. When then–DHS Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen tried to raise the subject of electoral security with the president, acting White House Chief of Staff Mick Mulvaney reportedly told her to steer clear of it. According to *The New York Times*, Mulvaney said it "wasn't a great subject and should be kept below his level."

This atmosphere stifled what could have been a genuinely bipartisan accomplishment. The subject of voting divides Republicans and Democrats. Especially since the *Bush v. Gore* decision in 2000, the parties have stitched voting into their master narratives. Democrats accuse Republicans of suppressing the vote; Republicans accuse Democrats of flooding the polls with corpses and other cheating schemes. Despite this rancor, both sides seemed to agree that Russian hacking of voting systems was not a good thing. After the 2016 election, Democratic Senator Amy Klobuchar, from Minnesota, partnered with Republican Senator James Lankford, from Oklahoma, on the Secure Elections Act. The bill would have given the states money to replace electronic voting machines with ones that leave a paper trail and would have required states to audit election results to confirm their accuracy. The reforms would also have had the seemingly salutary effect of making it easier for voters to cast ballots.

The Secure Elections Act wouldn't have provided perfect insulation from Russian attacks, but it would have been a meaningful improvement on the status quo, and it briefly looked as if it could pass. Then, on the eve of a session to mark up the legislation—a moment for lawmakers to add their final touches—Senate Republicans suddenly withdrew their support, effectively killing the bill. Afterward, Democrats mocked Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell as "Moscow Mitch," an appellation that stung enough that the senator ultimately agreed to legislation that supplied the states with hundreds of millions of dollars to buy new voting systems—but without any security demands placed on the states or any meaningful reforms to a broken system. McConnell made it clear that he despised the whole idea of a legislative fix to the electoral-security problem: "I'm not going to let Democrats and their water carriers in the media use Russia's attack on our democracy as a Trojan horse for partisan wish-list items that would not actually make our elections any safer." For McConnell, suppressing votes was a higher priority than protecting them from a foreign adversary.

2. The Big Phish

To raise the subject of John Podesta's email in his presence is a callous act. But I wanted his help tabulating a more precise toll of Russian hacking—how it leaves a messy trail of hurt feelings, saps precious mental space, and reshapes the course of a campaign. After repeatedly prodding him for an interview, I finally met with Hillary Clinton's old campaign chief in his Washington office, which stares down onto the steeple of the church Abraham Lincoln attended during the Civil War. Dressed in a plaid shirt, with a ballpoint pen clipped into the pocket, Podesta rocked back and forth in a swivel chair as he allowed me to question him about one of the most wince-inducing moments in recent political history.

Months before WikiLeaks began publishing his emails, Podesta had an inkling that his Gmail account had been compromised. Internal campaign documents had appeared on an obscure website, and he considered the possibility that they had been lifted from his computer. Still, the call from a member of the campaign's

John Podesta rides the Vamoose Bus in June 2015. After WikiLeaks published the Clinton-campaign chairman's emails, identity thieves attempted to claim his Social Security benefits and applied for credit cards in his name. One fraudster even stole the points Podesta had accumulated in the Vamoose rewards program.

MELINA MARA / THE WASHINGTON POST / GETTY

communications team on October 7, 2016, left him gobsmacked. As he finished a session of debate preparation with Clinton, he learned that Julian Assange intended to unfurl the contents of his inbox over the remaining month of the campaign. It's a familiar if much-ignored maxim in politics that no email should ever contain content one wouldn't want to see on the front page of *The New York Times*. This was now Podesta's reality.

On the 10th floor of the Clinton campaign's headquarters, in Brooklyn, a team of 14 staffers quickly assembled. They covered a glass door in opaque paper to prevent voyeurs from observing their work and began to pore over every word of his 60,000 emails—every forwarded PDF, every gripe from an employee, even the meticulous steps of his risotto recipe. The project would consume the entirety of the month. Every day, Podesta set aside time to meet with emissaries from the 10th floor and review their findings. "I willed myself not to feel pain," he told me.

The material that WikiLeaks eventually posted created some awkward moments. Podesta had received snarky emails from colleagues, and had sent a few himself. To repair relationships, Podesta found himself apologizing to co-workers, friends, former Cabinet secretaries. Even when the contents of the leaked messages seemed innocuous, new annoyances would arise. WikiLeaks hadn't redacted the correspondence to protect privacy, leaving the cellphone numbers of campaign staffers for the world to view. In the middle of meetings, staffers would find their devices vibrating incessantly; strangers would fill their voicemails with messages like *I hope you're raped in prison*. Identity thieves quickly circled Podesta, attempting to claim his Social Security benefits and applying for credit cards in his name. Despite a political career that has permitted him to whisper into the ears of presidents, the legendarily frugal Podesta had commuted to New York on Vamoose, a discount bus line. A fraudster exploited the hack to steal the points he had accumulated in the Vamoose rewards program.

As Podesta revisited these painful moments, he claimed that he'd stoically persisted in their face: "I kept going on television. I kept raising money. I kept traveling with Hillary and President Clinton. I kept doing everything that I had been doing." But these were the closing weeks of an election that would turn on fewer than 80,000 votes spread across three states. For a campaign that arguably didn't invest its resources properly in the final stretch, the question must be asked: How badly did the Russians throw the campaign off its game? The least visible damage of the hack might have been the most decisive.

In the years since the Podesta hack, Microsoft's Tom Burt has continually battled its perpetrators. As the man charged with safeguarding the security of Windows, Word, and his company's other software, he has developed a feel for the GRU's rhythms and habits. Through Microsoft's work with political parties and campaigns around the world—the company offers them training and sells them security software at a discount—Burt has accumulated lengthy dossiers on past actions.

What he's noticed is that attacks tend to begin on the furthest fringes of a campaign. A standard GRU operation starts with think-tank fellows, academics, and political consultants. These people and institutions typically have weak cybersecurity fortifications, the penetration of which serves dual purposes. As the GRU pores through the inboxes of wonks and professors, it gathers useful intelligence about a campaign. But the hacked accounts also provide platforms for a more direct assault. Once inside, the GRU will send messages from the hacked accounts. The emails come from a trusted source, and carry a plausible message. According to Burt, "It will say something like 'Saw this great article on the West Bank that you should review,' and it's got a link to a PDF. You click on it, and now your campaign network is infected." (Although Burt won't discuss specific institutions, he wrote a blog post last year describing attacks on the German Marshall Fund and the European offices of the Aspen Institute.)

Podesta fell victim to a generic spear-phishing attack: a spoofed security warning urging him to change his Gmail password. Many of us might like to think we're sophisticated enough to avoid such a trap, but the Russians have grown adept at tailoring bespoke messages that could ensnare even the most vigilant target. Emails arrive from a phony address that looks as if it belongs to a friend or colleague, but has one letter omitted. One investigator told me that he's noticed that Russians use details gleaned from Facebook to script tantalizing messages. If a campaign consultant has told his circle of friends about an upcoming bass-fishing trip, the GRU will package its malware in an email offering discounts on bass-fishing gear.

Many of these techniques are borrowed from Russian cybercrime syndicates, which hack their way into banks and traffic in stolen credit cards. Burt has seen these illicit organizations using technologies that he believes will soon be imported to politics. For instance, new synthetic-audio software allows hackers to mimic a voice with convincing verisimilitude. Burt told me, "In the cybercrime world, you're starting to see audio phishes, where somebody gets a voicemail message from their boss, for example, saying, 'Hey, I need you to transfer this money to the following account right away.' It sounds just like your boss and so you do it."

What the Russians can't obtain from afar, they will attempt to pilfer with agents on the ground. The same GRU unit that hacked Podesta has allegedly sent operatives to Rio de Janeiro, Kuala Lumpur, and The Hague to practice what is known as "close-access hacking." Once on the ground, they use off-the-shelf electronic equipment to pry open the Wi-Fi network of whomever they're spying on.

The Russians, in other words, take risks few other nations would dare. They are willing to go to such lengths because they've reaped such rich rewards from hacking. Of all the Russian tactics deployed in 2016, the hacking and leaking of documents did the most immediate and palpable damage—distracting attention from the *Access Hollywood* tape, and fueling theories that the Democratic Party had rigged its process to squash Bernie Sanders's campaign.

In 2020, the damage could be greater still. Podesta told me that when he realized his email had been breached, he feared that the hackers would manufacture embarrassing or even incriminating emails and then publish them alongside the real ones. It's impossible to know their reasoning, but Russian hackers made what would prove to be a clever decision not to alter Podesta's email. Many media outlets accepted whatever emails WikiLeaks published without pausing to verify every detail, and they weren't punished for their haste. The Podesta leaks thus established a precedent, an expectation that hacked material is authentic—perhaps the most authentic version of reality available, an opportunity to see past a campaign's messaging and spin and read its innermost thoughts.

In fact, the Russians have no scruples about altering documents. In 2017, hackers with links to the GRU breached the inboxes of French President Emmanuel Macron's campaign staffers. The contents were rather banal, filled with restaurant reservations and trivial memos. Two days before these were released, other documents surfaced on internet message boards. Unlike the emails, these were pure fabrications, which purported to show that Macron had used a tax haven in the Cayman Islands. The timing of their release, however, gave them credibility. It was natural to assume that they had been harvested from the email hack, too. The Macron leaks suggested a dangerous new technique, a sinister mixing of the hacked and the fabricated intended to exploit the electorate's hunger for raw evidence and faith in purloined documents.

3. Disinformation 2.0

In the spring of 2015, trolls in St. Petersburg peered at the feed of a webcam that had been furtively placed in New York City. Sitting in front of a computer screen on the second floor of a squat concrete office building, the trolls waited to see if they could influence the behavior of Americans from the comfort of Russian soil.

The men worked for a company bankrolled by Yevgeny Prigozhin, a bald-headed hot-dog vendor turned restaurateur, known to the Russian press as "Putin's chef." In the kleptocratic system that is the Russian economy, men like Prigozhin profit from their connections to Putin and maintain their inner-circle status by performing missions on his behalf. The operation in St. Petersburg was run by the Internet Research Agency, a troll farm serving the interests of the Kremlin. (Prigozhin has denied any involvement with the IRA.)

The IRA is an heir to a proud Russian tradition. In the Soviet Union's earliest days, the state came to believe that it could tip the world toward revolution through psychological warfare and deception, exploiting the divisions and weaknesses of bourgeois society. When it was assigned this task, the KGB referred to its program by the bureaucratic yet ominous name Active Measures. It pursued this work with artistic verve. It forged letters from the Ku Klux Klan that threatened to murder African athletes at the 1984 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles. It fomented conspiracies about the CIA—that the agency had orchestrated the spread of the AIDS virus in a laboratory and plotted the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. Some of these KGB schemes were harebrained. But as one defector to the West put it, more Americans believed the Soviet version of JFK's murder than the Warren Report.

The IRA has updated the principles of Active Measures for the digital age. On social media, disinformation can flourish like never before. Whereas the KGB once needed to find journalistic vehicles to plant their stories—usually the small-audience fringes of the radical press—Facebook and Twitter hardly distinguished between mainstream outlets and clickbait upstarts. And many of the new platforms were designed to manipulate users, to keep them engaged for as long as possible. Their algorithms elevated content that fueled panic and anger.

With the New York webcam, the IRA was testing a hunch: that, through the miracle of social media, it could now toy with Americans as if they were marionettes. As the political scientist Thomas Rid recounts in his powerful new history, *Active Measures*, a post on Facebook promised that free hot dogs would be available to anyone who arrived on a specific corner at a prescribed time. Back in St. Petersburg, IRA employees watched as New Yorkers arrived, looked at their phones in frustration, and skulked away.

The ruse was innocuous, but it proved a theory that could be put to far more nefarious ends: Social media had made it possible, at shockingly low cost, for Russians to steer the emotions and even movements of Americans. No study has quantified how many votes have been swayed by the 10 million tweets that the IRA has pumped into the digital world; no metric captures how its posts on Facebook and Instagram altered America's emotional valence as it headed to the polls in 2016. In the end, the IRA's menagerie of false personas and fusillades of splenetic memes were arguably more effective at garnering sensationalistic headlines than shifting public opinion. For their part, the IRA's minions immodestly credited themselves with having tilted the trajectory of history. The U.S. government obtained an email from an IRA employee describing the scene at the St. Petersburg office on Election Night: "When around 8 a.m. the most important result of our work arrived, we uncorked a tiny bottle of champagne … took one gulp each and looked into each other's eyes … We uttered almost in unison: 'We made America great.'"

Having run a noisy operation in 2016, the IRA has since learned to modulate itself. Its previous handiwork, much of which was riddled with poor syntax and grammatical errors, hardly required a discerning eye to identify. These days, the IRA takes care to avoid such sloppiness. Now, when they want to, IRA trolls can make themselves inconspicuous.

Relying on this quieter approach, the IRA has carried the theory of its hot-dog experiment into American political life. When white supremacists applied for a permit to hold a march in 2018 to commemorate the first anniversary of their protests in Charlottesville, Virginia, a Facebook group organized a counterprotest in Washington, D.C. The group was called the Resisters. Its administrators, who went by the names Mary and Natasha, recruited a coterie of enthusiastic organizers to promote the rally. When Facebook took down the Resisters' page—noting its ties to IRA accounts, and implying that Mary and Natasha were fictitious creations—American leftists were shocked to learn that they had apparently been hatching plans with foreign trolls. According to *The New York Times*, they were also furious with Facebook: Whether or not the page was a Russian ploy, it had become a venue for real Americans to air their real grievances. In fact, it was hard to pinpoint where the Active Measures ended and the genuine action began—the sort of tradecraft that the KGB would have admired.

Although the IRA might practice stealth when the operation demands, in other circumstances it will deploy raw bluster. Starting in 2017, it launched a sustained effort to exaggerate the specter of its interference, a tactic that social-media companies call "perception hacking." Its trolls were instructed to post about the Mueller report and fan the flames of public anger over the blatant interference it revealed. On the day of the 2018 midterm elections, a group claiming to be the IRA published a grandiloquent manifesto on its website that declared: "Soon after November 6, you will realize that your vote means nothing. We decide who you vote for and what candidates will win or lose. Whether you vote or not, there is no difference as we control the voting and counting systems. Remember, your vote has zero value. We are choosing for you."

The claim was absurd, but the posturing had a purpose. If enough Americans come to believe that Russia can do whatever it wants to our democratic processes without consequence, that, too, increases cynicism about American democracy, and thereby serves Russian ends. As Laura Rosenberger, a former National Security Council staffer under Obama who runs the Alliance for Securing Democracy, put it, "They would like us to see a Russian under every bed."

Judging by this year's presidential-primary campaign, they have been successful in this effort. When the Iowa Democratic Party struggled to implement new technology used to tally results for the state's caucus, television panelists, Twitter pundits, and even a member of Congress speculated about the possibility of hacking, despite a lack of evidence to justify such loose talk. American incompetence had been confused for a plot against America.

4. An Uncoordinated Response

As the outlines of the IRA's efforts began to emerge in the months following the 2016 election, Facebook at first refused to acknowledge the problem. The company's defensiveness called attention to its laissez-faire attitude toward the content that it elevated in people's News Feeds. Facebook found itself flayed by congressional committees, its inner workings exposed by investigative journalists. Ostensibly it had been Alex Stamos's job to prevent the last attack, and now he faced another wave of disinformation, with midterm elections fast approaching. Stamos worried that, in the absence of an orchestrated defense, his company, as well as the nation, would repeat the mistakes of 2016.

In the spring of 2018, he invited executives from the big tech companies and leaders of intelligence agencies to Facebook's headquarters in Menlo Park, California. As he thought about it, Stamos was surprised that such a summit hadn't been organized sooner. What shocked him more was a realization he had as the meeting convened: Few of these people even knew one another. "People who ran different agencies working on foreign interference met for the first time at Menlo Park, even though they were 10 Metro stops away in D.C.," he told me. "The normal collaborative process in government didn't exist on this issue."

Stamos's summit succeeded in spurring cooperation. Prior to the meeting, one tech company would identify and disable Russian accounts but fail to warn its competitors, allowing the same trolls to continue operating with impunity. Over the course of 2018, the tech industry gradually began acting in concert. The lead investigators on the threat-intelligence teams at 30 companies—including Facebook, Verizon, and Reddit—joined a common channel on Slack, the messaging platform. When one company spies a nascent operation, it can now ring a bell for the others. This winter, Facebook and Twitter jointly shut down dozens of accounts associated with a single residential address in Accra, Ghana, where the Russians had set up a troll factory and hired local 20-somethings to impersonate African Americans and stoke online anger.

Yet this remains a game of cat and mouse in which the mice enjoy certain advantages. Despite the engineering prowess of the social-media companies, they haven't yet built algorithms capable of reliably identifying coordinated campaigns run by phony Russian accounts. In most instances, their algorithms will suggest the inauthenticity of certain accounts. Those data points become a lead, which is then passed along to human investigators.

Facebook has several dozen employees on its threat-intelligence team, many of them alumni of the three-letter agencies in Washington. Still, the tech companies rely heavily on law enforcement for tips. Facebook and Twitter have frequent check-ins with the FBI. Without the bureau, Facebook might have missed an IRA video filled with lies about Russian tampering in the midterm elections. After a heads-up from the government, Facebook blocked the IRA from uploading the video before it ever appeared on its site, using the same technique that it deploys to suppress Islamic State snuff videos and child pornography. Rising from their denialist crouch, the social-media companies have proved themselves capable of aggressive policing; after treating the IRA as a harmless interloper, they came to treat it with the sort of disdain they otherwise reserve for terrorists and deviants.

Devising strategies for thwarting the last attack is far easier than preventing the next one. Even if Russian disinformation can be tamped down on social media—and the efforts here, on balance, are encouraging—there are other ways, arguably more consequential, to manipulate American politics, and scant defense against them.

On an early-March afternoon, I typed the Federal Election Commission as a destination into Uber and was disgorged at a building the agency hasn't occupied for two years. The antiquated address placed me on course to arrive half an hour late for an appointment with Ellen Weintraub, the longest-serving and most vociferous member of the commission nominally assigned to block the flow of foreign money into political campaigns. When I called her office to inform her of my tardiness, her assistant told me not to worry: Weintraub's schedule was wide open that afternoon. In fact, for the past six months the FEC hadn't conducted much official business. Only three Senate-approved commissioners were installed in their jobs, even though the agency should have six and needs four for a quorum.

The social-media companies no longer treat Russian trolls like harmless interlopers and have proved capable of aggressive policing. But thwarting the last line of attack is easier than preventing new ones.

Weintraub, a Democrat, has an impish streak. Near the beginning of the FEC's hibernation, she called out a fellow commissioner who had blocked the publication of a memo that seemed to criticize the Trump campaign for its 2016 meeting with a Russian lawyer—then posted the memo in a 57-part thread on Twitter. Weintraub has grown accustomed to her colleagues ignoring her questions about the presence of Russian and other illicit money in American campaigns. When the commission received a complaint suggesting that the FBI was investigating the National Rifle Association as a conduit for Russian money, she asked her fellow commissioners for permission to call the FBI, to, as she put it, "see if they have interesting information they want to share. But they said, 'We're not going to call the FBI.' They didn't want to do anything."

Outside Weintraub's office, the subject of Russia's illicit financing of campaigns hardly provokes any attention. The Alliance for Securing Democracy was the only organization I could find that comprehensively tracks the issue. It has collected examples of Russian money flowing into campaigns around the world: a 9.4-million-euro loan made to the French nationalist Marine Le Pen's party; operatives arriving in Madagascar before an election with backpacks full of cash to buy TV ads on behalf of Russia's preferred candidate and to pay journalists to cover his rallies.

Or take a case closer to home: Lev Parnas and Igor Fruman—the Soviet-born Americans who worked with Rudy Giuliani in his search for politically damaging material to deploy against former Vice President Joe Biden—were charged with conspiring to funnel money from an unnamed Russian into American campaigns. Some of the cases cited by the Alliance for Securing Democracy are circumstantial, but they form a pattern. Since 2016, the group has identified at least 60 instances of Russia financing political campaigns beyond its borders. (The Kremlin denies meddling in foreign elections.)

When I asked Weintraub if she had a sense of how many such examples exist in American politics, she replied, "We know there's stuff going on out there, and we're just not doing anything." Since the Supreme Court's 2010 *Citizens United* decision, which lifted restrictions on campaign finance, hardly any systemic checks preclude foreigners from subsidizing politicians using the cover of anonymous shell companies. With that decision, the high court opened the door for Russia to pursue one of its favored methods of destabilizing global democracy. By covertly financing campaigns, the Russians have helped elevate extremist politicians and nurture corrosive social movements. "Everyone knows there are loopholes in our campaign-finance system," Weintraub said. "Why would we think that our adversaries, who have demonstrated a desire to muck around in our democracy, wouldn't be using those loopholes, too?"

I asked the ranking member of the Senate Intelligence Committee if he trusts the information he receives about Russia. "I don't know the answer to that," he replied.

Problems of inattention, problems of coordination, and deep concerns about November—these themes came up over and over in my interviews for this story. Indeed, at times everyone seemed to be sounding the same alarm. H. R. McMaster, who briefly served as Donald Trump's national security adviser, sounded it when he proposed a new task force to focus the government's often shambolic efforts to safeguard the election. Adam Schiff, the chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, sounded it when he realized how poorly the bureaucracy was sharing the information it was gathering about the Russian threat.

There was a moment that crystallized Schiff's sense of this disjointedness. In the summer of 2018, he attended a security conference in Aspen, Colorado, where Tom Burt revealed that Microsoft had detected Russian phishing attacks targeting Democratic senatorial candidates. "When I went back to Washington," Schiff told me, "I asked agency heads within the [intelligence community] whether they were aware of this. The answer was no." That the chairman of the House Intelligence Committee had to learn this elemental fact about his own branch of government at a public gathering is troubling; that the people charged with protecting the country didn't know it is flabbergasting.

The sprawling federal bureaucracy has never been particularly adept at the kind of coordination necessary to anticipate a wily adversary's next move. But there is another reason for the government's alarmingly inadequate response: a president who sees attempts to counter the Russia threat as a personal affront.

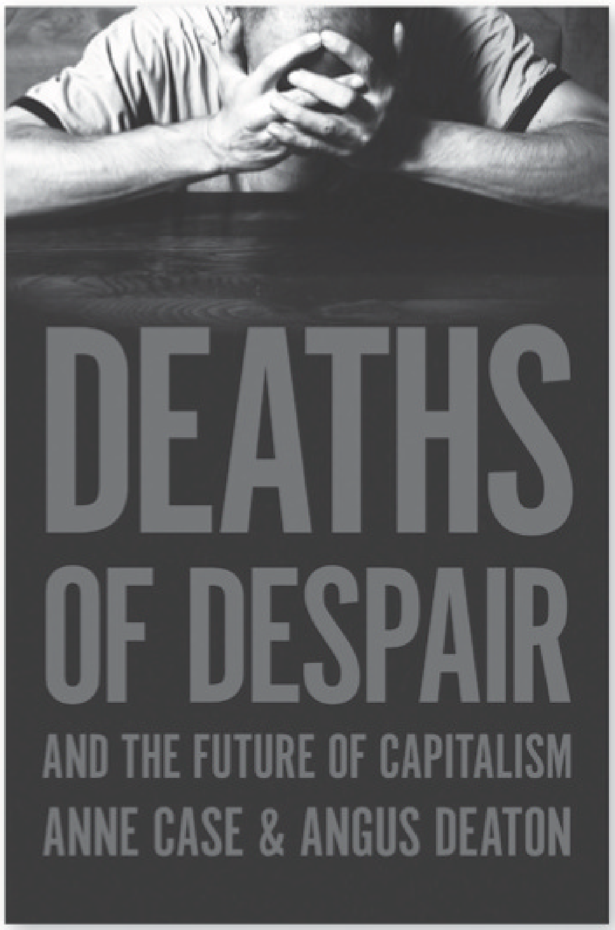
After McMaster was fired, having made little if any progress on Russia, the director of national intelligence, Dan Coats, took up the cause, installing in his office an election-security adviser named Shelby Pierson. This past February, Pierson briefed Schiff's committee that the Russians were planning to interfere in the upcoming election, and that Trump remained Moscow's preferred candidate. Anyone who follows the president on Twitter knows this is a subject that provokes his fury. Indeed, the day after Pierson's testimony, the president upbraided Coats's successor, Joseph Maguire, for Pierson's assessment. A week later, he fired Maguire and installed in his place the ambassador to Germany, Richard Grenell, a loyalist with no intelligence experience. Grenell immediately set about confirming the wisdom behind Trump's choice. Three weeks into his tenure, a senior intelligence official in the Office of the DNI informed the Senate that Pierson's assessment was mistaken.

Trump had graphically illustrated his recurring message to the intelligence community: He doesn't want to hear warnings about Russian interference. Mark Warner, the highest-ranking Democrat on the Senate Intelligence Committee, told me, "A day doesn't go by that I don't hear from someone in the intelligence community saying, 'Oh my gosh, we're worried about integrity, we're worried about morale, we're worried about willingness to speak truth to power.'" I asked Warner whether he could still trust the intelligence about Russia he received—whether he has faith that the government will render an accurate portrait of the Russian threat to the upcoming presidential election. As he considered his answer, he leaned toward me. "I don't know the answer to that," he replied, "and that bothers me."

Vladimir Putin dreams of discrediting the American democratic system, and he will never have a more reliable ally than Donald Trump. A democracy can't defend itself if it can't honestly describe the attacks against it. But the president hasn't just undermined his own country's defenses—he has actively abetted the adversary's efforts. If Russia wants to tarnish the political process as hopelessly rigged, it has a bombastic amplifier standing behind the seal of the presidency, a man who reflexively depicts his opponents as frauds and any system that produces an outcome he doesn't like as fixed. If Russia wants to spread disinformation, the president continually softens an audience for it, by instructing the public to disregard authoritative journalism as the prevarications of a traitorous elite and by spouting falsehoods on Twitter.

In 2020, Russia might not need to push the U.S. for it to suffer a terrible election-year tumble. Even without interventions from abroad, it is shockingly easy to imagine how a pandemic might provide a pretext for indefinitely delaying an election or how this president, narrowly dispatched at the polls, might refuse to accept defeat. But restraint wouldn't honor Russia's tradition of Active Measures. And there may never be a moment quite so ripe for taking the old hashtag out of storage and giving it a triumphalist turn. #DemocracyRIP. *A*

Franklin Foer is a staff writer at The Atlantic.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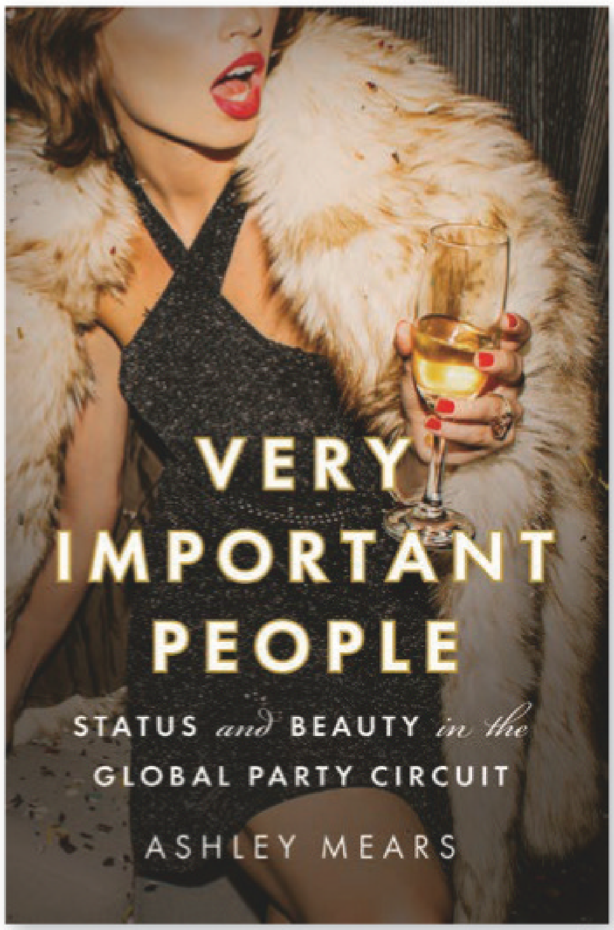
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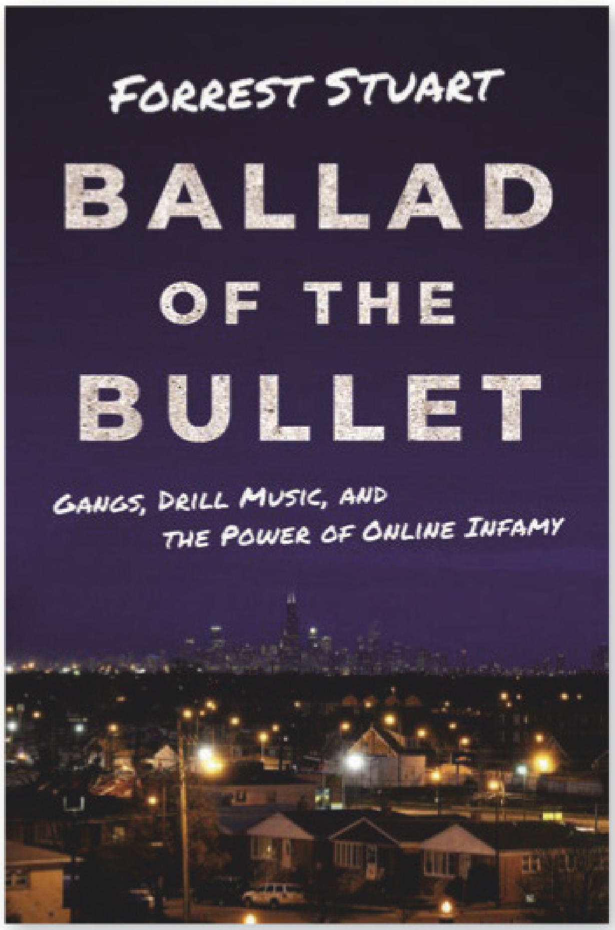
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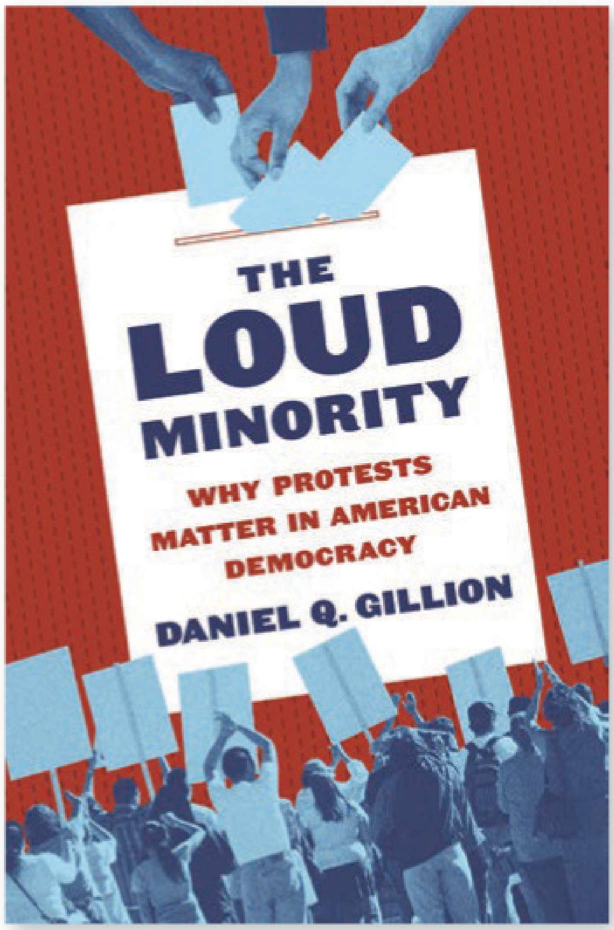
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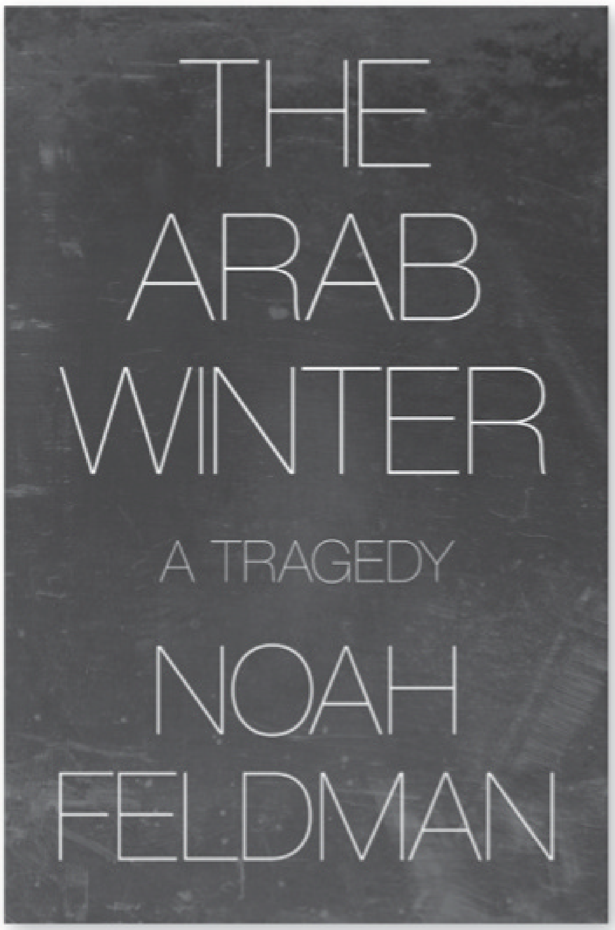
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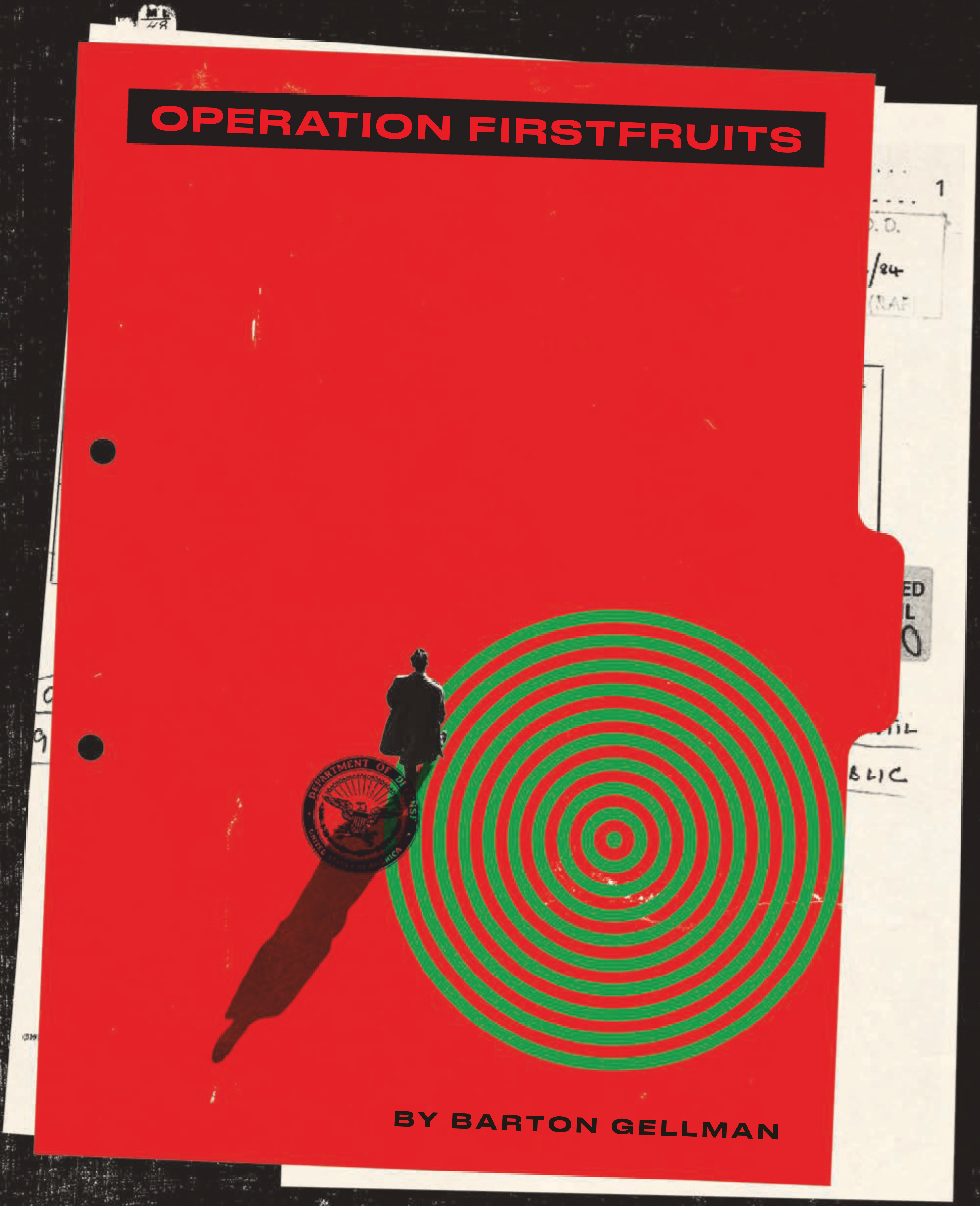

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WHERE IS THE LINE BETWEEN JOURNALISM AND ESPIONAGE? AND WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOUR OWN GOVERNMENT THINKS YOU’VE CROSSED IT?

“WHAT TIME ~~EXACTLY~~ EXACTLY DOES YOUR CLOCK SAY?”

asked the voice on the telephone, the first words Edward Snowden ever spoke to me aloud. (Our previous communications had all been via secure text chats over encrypted anonymous links on secret servers.) I glanced at my wrist—3:22 p.m. “Good. Meet me exactly at four. I’ll be wearing a backpack.” Of course he would; Snowden would never leave his laptop unattended.

The rendezvous point Snowden selected that day, December 5, 2013, was a gaudy casino hotel called the Korston Club, on Kosygina Street in Moscow. Enormous flashing whorls of color adorned the exterior in homage to Las Vegas. In the lobby, a full-size grand player piano tinkled with energetic pop. The promenade featured a “Girls Bar” with purple-neon decor, stainless-steel chairs and mirrors competing for attention with imitation wood paneling, knockoff Persian rugs, and pulsing strobe lights on plastic foliage. Also, feathers. The place looked like a trailer full of old Madonna stage sets that had been ravaged by a tornado.

As I battled sensory overload, a young man appeared near the player piano, his appearance subtly altered. A minder might be anywhere in this circus of a lobby, but I saw no government escort. We shook hands, and Snowden walked me wordlessly to a back elevator and up to his hotel room. For two days, throughout 14 hours of interviews, he did not once part the curtains or step outside. He remained a target of surpassing interest to the intelligence services of more than one nation.

He resisted questioning about his private life, but he allowed that he missed small things from home. Milkshakes, for one. *Why not make your own?* Snowden refused to confirm or deny possession of a blender. Like all appliances, blenders have an electrical signature when switched on. He believed that the U.S. government was trying to discover where he lived. He did not wish to offer clues, electromagnetic or otherwise. U.S. intelligence agencies had closely studied electrical emissions when scouting Osama bin Laden’s hideout in Pakistan. “Raising the shields and lowering the target surface” was one of Snowden’s security mantras.

On bathroom breaks, he took his laptop with him. “There’s a level of paranoia where you go, ‘You know what? This could be too much,’” he said when I smiled at this. “But it costs nothing. It’s—you get used to it. You adjust your behavior. And if you’re reducing risk, why not?”

Over six hours that day and eight hours the next, Snowden loosened up a bit, telling me for the first time why he had reached out to me the previous spring. “It was important that this not be a radical project,” he said, an allusion to the politics of Glenn Greenwald and Laura Poitras, the other two journalists with whom he’d shared digital archives purloined from the National Security Agency a few months earlier. “I thought you’d be more serious but less reliable. I put you through a hell of a lot more vetting than everybody else. God, you did screw me, so I didn’t vet you enough.” He was referring to my profile of him in *The Washington Post* that June, in which I had inadvertently exposed an online handle that he had still been using. (After that he had disappeared on me for a while.)

When we broke for the night, I walked into a hotel stairwell and down two floors, where I found an armchair in a deserted hallway. I might or might not have been under surveillance then, but I had to assume I would be once back in my room, so this was my best chance to work unobserved.

I moved the audio files from the memory card of my voice recorder to an encrypted archive on my laptop, along with the notes I had typed. I locked the archive in such a way that I could not reopen it without a private electronic key that I’d left hidden back in New York. I uploaded the encrypted archive to an anonymous server, then another, then a third. Downloading it from the servers would require another private key, also stored in New York. I wiped the encrypted files from my laptop and cut the voice recorder’s unencrypted memory card into pieces. Russian authorities would find nothing on my machines. When I reached the U.S. border,

OPENING SPREAD: HERITAGE IMAGES / GETTY

where anyone can be searched for any reason and the warrant requirement of the Fourth Amendment does not apply, I would possess no evidence of this interview. Even under legal compulsion, I would be unable to retrieve the recordings and notes in transit. I hoped to God I could retrieve them when I got home.

WERE MY SECURITY MEASURES EXCESSIVE? I knew the spy agencies of multiple governments—most notably the United States'—were eager to glean anything they could from Edward Snowden. After all, he had stolen massive amounts of classified material from NSA servers and shared it with Poitras, Greenwald, and me, and we had collectively published only a fraction of it. The U.S. government wanted Snowden extradited for prosecution. But I'm not a thief or a spy myself. I'm a journalist. Was I just being paranoid?

Six months earlier, in June 2013, when the Snowden story was less than two weeks old, I went on *Face the Nation* to talk about it. Afterward, I wiped off the television makeup, unclipped my lapel microphone, and emerged into a pleasant pre-summer Sunday outside the CBS News studio in the Georgetown neighborhood of Washington, D.C. In the back of a cab I pulled out my iPad. The display powered on, then dissolved into static and guttered out. *Huh?* A few seconds passed and the screen lit up again. White text began to scroll across an all-black background. The text moved too fast for me to take it all in, but I caught a few fragments.

```
# root:xnu …
# dumping kernel …
# patching file system …
```

Wait, what? It looked like a Unix terminal window. The word *root* and the hashtag symbol meant that somehow the device had been placed in super-user mode. Someone had taken control of my iPad, blasting through Apple's security restrictions and acquiring the power to rewrite anything that the operating system could touch. I dropped the tablet on the seat next to me as if it were contagious. I had an impulse to toss it out the window. I must have been mumbling exclamations out loud, because the driver asked me what was wrong. I ignored him and mashed the power button. Watching my iPad turn against me was remarkably unsettling. This sleek little slab of glass and aluminum featured a microphone, cameras on the front and back, and a whole array of internal sensors. An exemplary spy device.

SOMEONE HAD TAKEN CONTROL OF MY IPAD, BLASTING THROUGH APPLE'S SECURITY RESTRICTIONS. I DROPPED THE TABLET ON THE SEAT NEXT TO ME AS IF IT WERE CONTAGIOUS.

I took a quick mental inventory: No, I had not used the iPad to log in to my online accounts. No, I didn't keep sensitive notes on there. None of that protected me as much as I wished to believe. For one thing, this was not a novice hacking attempt. Breaking into an iPad remotely, without a wired connection, requires scarce and perishable tools. Apple closes holes in its software as fast as it finds them. New vulnerabilities are in high demand by sophisticated criminals and intelligence agencies. Shadowy private brokers pay millions in bounties for software exploits of the kind I had just seen in action. Someone had devoted resources to the project of breaking into my machine. I did not understand how my adversary had even found the iPad. If intruders had located this device, I had to assume that they could find my phone, too, as well as any computer I used to access the internet. I was not meant to see the iPad do what it had just done; I had just lucked into seeing it. If I hadn't, I would have thought it was working normally. It would not have been working for me.

This was the first significant intrusion into my digital life—that I knew of. It was far from the last. In the first days of 2014, an NSA whistleblower, Tom Drake, told me he had received an invitation from one of my email addresses, asking him to join me for a chat in Google Hangouts. It looked exactly like an authentic notice from Google, but Drake had the presence of mind to check whether the invitation had really come from me. It had not. An impostor posing as me wanted to talk with Drake.

Shortly after that, Google started refusing my login credentials on two accounts. An error message popped up in my mail client: "Too many simultaneous connections." I looked under the hood and found that most of the connections came from IP addresses I did not recognize. On the Gmail page, a pink alert bar appeared at the top, reading, "Warning: We believe state-sponsored attackers may be attempting to compromise your account or computer. Protect yourself now."

Which state sponsor? Per company policy, Google will not say, fearing that information could enable evasion of its security protocols. I did some further reporting and later learned from confidential sources that the would-be intruder in my accounts was Turkey's national intelligence service, the Millî Istihbarat Teşkilatı. Even though I never send anything confidential over email, this was terrible news. A dozen foreign countries had to have greater motive and wherewithal to go after the NSA documents Snowden had shared with me—Russia, China, Israel, North Korea, and Iran, for starters. If Turkey was trying to hack me too, the threat landscape was more crowded than I'd feared. Some of the hackers were probably better than Turkey's—maybe too good to be snared by Google's defenses. Not encouraging.

The MacBook Air I used for everyday computing seemed another likely target. I sent a forensic image of its working memory to a leading expert on the security of the Macintosh operating system. He found unexpected daemons running on my machine, serving functions he could not ascertain. (A daemon is a background computing process, and most of them are benign, but the satanic flavor of the term seemed fitting here.) Some software exploits burrow in and make themselves very hard to remove, even if you wipe and reinstall the operating system, so I decided to abandon the laptop.

For my next laptop, I placed an anonymous order through the university where I held a fellowship. I used two cutouts for the purchase, with my name mentioned nowhere on the paperwork, and I took care not to discuss the transaction by email. I thought this would reduce the risk of tampering in transit—something the NSA, the FBI, and foreign intelligence services are all known to have done. (No need to hack into a machine if it comes pre-infected.) But my new laptop, a MacBook Pro, also began to experience cascading hardware failures, beginning with a keyboard that lagged behind my typing, even with a virgin operating system. The problems were highly unusual.

I brought the machine for repair to Tekserve, a New York City institution that at the time was the largest independent Apple service provider in the United States. I had been doing business there since at least the early 1990s, a couple of years after Tekserve set up shop in a Flatiron warehouse space. I liked the quirky vibe of the place, which had a porch swing indoors and an ancient Coke machine that once charged a nickel a bottle. But Tekserve's most important feature was that its service manager allowed me to stand with a senior technician on the repair floor as he worked on my machine. I preferred not to let it out of my sight.

The technician tested and swapped out, seriatim, the keyboard, the logic board, the input/output board, and, finally, the power interface. After three visits, the problem remained unsolved. Keystrokes would produce nothing at first, then a burst of characters after a long delay. Tekserve consulted with supervisors at Apple. Nobody could explain it. I asked the technician whether he saw anything on the circuit boards that should not be there, but he said he was not equipped to detect spy gear like that. "All I know is I've replaced every single part in the machine," he told me. "We've never seen this kind of behavior before." I gave up and got another one.

When the Snowden story broke, I was using a BlackBerry smartphone. I began to receive blank text messages and emails that appeared to have no content and no reply address. Texts and emails without visible text are commonly used to transmit malicious payloads. I got rid of the BlackBerry and bought an iPhone, which experts told me was the most secure mobile device available to the general public. I do not do sensitive business on a smartphone, but I did not like the feeling of being watched.

In January 2014, I became an early adopter of SecureDrop, an anonymous, encrypted communications system for sources and journalists. It is still the safest way to reach me in confidence, and I have received valuable reporting tips this way. Having advertised a way to reach me anonymously, I've also gotten my share of submissions from internet trolls and conspiracy theorists, as well as run-of-the-mill malware. I never run executable files or scripts that arrive by email, so these were not a big concern. One day, however, a more interesting exploit showed up—a file disguised as a leaked presentation on surveillance. I asked Morgan Marquis-Boire, a security researcher then affiliated with the Toronto-based Citizen Lab, if he would care to have a look. "You've got a juicy one," he wrote back.

Most hacking attempts are sent to thousands, or millions, of people at a time, as email attachments or links to infected websites. This one was customized for me. It was a class of malware known as a "remote access trojan," or RAT, capable of monitoring keystrokes, capturing screenshots, recording audio and video, and exfiltrating any file from my computer. "Piss off any Russians lately?" Marquis-Boire asked. The RAT was designed to link my computer to a command-and-control server hosted by Corbina Telecom, in Moscow. If I had triggered the RAT, a hacker could have watched and interacted with my computer in real time from there. Other IP addresses the malware communicated with were in Kazakhstan. And internal evidence suggested that the coder was a native speaker of Azeri, the language of Azerbaijan and the Russian republic of Dagestan. But the moment Marquis-Boire tried to probe the RAT for more information, the command-and-control server disappeared from the internet.

OVERTURES OF ANOTHER KIND came to my colleague Ashkan Soltani soon after his byline appeared alongside mine in *The Washington Post*. "Within the span of a week, three hot, really attractive women messaged me out of the blue" on OkCupid, he later told me over beers. Two of the women made their intentions known right away.

He pulled out screenshots of their messages. "Excuse my brazen demeanor but i find you incredibley cute and interesting," one of them wrote. "Let's meet up?"

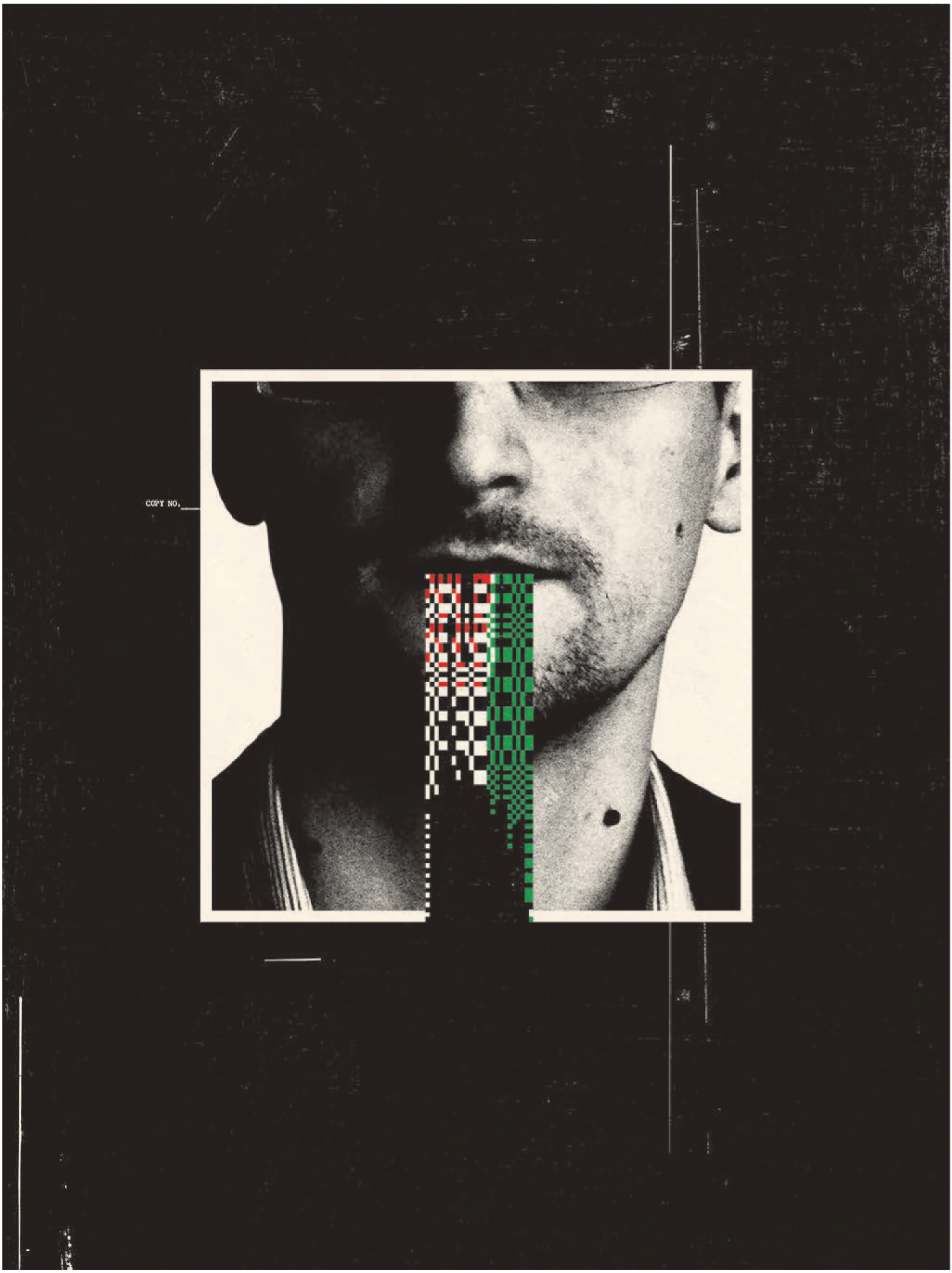
Then, on the day they set, she proposed getting together at his place. "It's gloomy out. makes me want to cuddle," she wrote.

"The fact that two girls in a row were making themselves available on the first date, I was like, *What the fuck?*" he told me. "*Am I being*, what—there's a word for that—"

"Honey trapped," I said.

"Yeah, honey trapped. I do okay, but it usually involves going out on a couple dates or whatever," he said. "I don't think I'm a bad-looking guy, but I'm not the kind of guy women message out of the blue and invite me to cuddle." He decided to cancel.

Soltani suspected an intelligence-agency setup—"the Chinese government trying to get up on me"—in an effort to elicit information about the NSA documents, or to steal digital files. A well-known information-security attack known as the "evil maid" relies on brief physical access to a computer to steal its encryption credentials. As it happened, the Snowden files were at that time locked in a *Washington Post* vault, and kept separate from the electronic keys that allowed access to them, but outsiders would not know that. And an attractive spy might assume that, with the right enticements, anything was possible.



BARTON GELLMAN / GETTY

When Soltani returned to OkCupid to document these interactions in more detail, he searched for the two women who had pursued him so aggressively. Their online profiles no longer existed.

Soltani did go out with the third woman who had reached out to him around the same time, "but for the longest time I would not bring her back to my house," he said. "I wasn't comfortable. I remember that feeling. I would never leave my phone when I went to the bathroom. It's weird to have opsec when you're dating."

By the time we had this conversation, in the late fall of 2015, Soltani and I had stopped writing stories for the *Post*. I was working on a book. Soltani had moved on to other things. He had retired his old laptop, returned an encryption key fob to me, and shed his last connection to classified materials. "When we were wrapping up, it felt really good that I didn't have to carry this burden anymore," he told me. "I mean, from the perspective of the duty to protect this stuff—there's still stuff in there that I think should absolutely never see light of day."

"You still constantly have to be diligent," he said to me. "You've been doing it for, like, three years. How do you do on vacation?"

Well, about that. Preoccupation with surveillance had distorted my professional and personal life. I had balked at the main gate of Disney World when I realized I would have to scan a fingerprint and wear a radio-tagged wristband everywhere in the park. My partner, Dafna, standing with our 7-year-old son, dared me with her eyes to refuse. I caved, of course. I brought my laptop almost everywhere I went, even on beach and hiking trips. I refused to leave my bag at coat checks at parties. The precautions I took to protect my electronics inconvenienced my friends and embarrassed my family. "You're moving further and further into a world that I'm not a part of, and that I don't understand and I don't want to be a part of," Dafna said one night. I had not come to terms, until that moment, with how abnormal my behavior had become. I never felt safe enough.

HOMELAND SECURITY HAD PRODUCED A 76-PAGE REPORT OF EVERY INTERNATIONAL FLIGHT I'D TAKEN SINCE 1983. CUSTOMS INSPECTORS HAD SECRETLY SEARCHED MY CHECKED BAGGAGE. GOVERNMENT SPOKESMEN WERE FORWARDING MY EMAILS TO THE FBI.

I built ever-thicker walls of electronic and physical self-defense. At one point in the spring of 2013, I requested a dedicated locked room at the *Post* for use by the reporters who worked with the Snowden documents. On a subsequent visit, a facilities staff member proudly showed me and Soltani the new space, in a place of honor beside the company president's office. The room had one feature I had specifically asked to avoid: a wall full of windows. If you craned your neck you could see a beaux-arts mansion half a block to the west—the Russian ambassador's residence in Washington. "You have to be kidding me," Soltani said. Crestfallen, I asked for a windowless space. The *Post* found one, installed a high-security lock, put a video camera in the hall outside, and brought in a huge safe that must have weighed 400 pounds.

I acquired a heavy safe for my office in New York as well. I will not enumerate every step I took to keep my work secure, but they were many and varied and sometimes befuddled me. The computers we used for the NSA archive were specially locked down. Soltani and I used laptops from which we'd removed the Wi-Fi and Bluetooth hardware, and disconnected the batteries. If a stranger appeared at the door, we merely had to tug on the quick-release power cables to switch off and re-encrypt the machines instantly. We stored the laptops in the vault and kept encryption keys on hardware, itself encrypted, that we took away with us each time we left the room, even for bathroom breaks. We sealed the USB ports. I disconnected and locked up the internet-router switch in my New York office every night. I dabbed epoxy and glitter on the screws along the bottom of all my machines, to help detect tampering in my absence. (The glitter dries in unique, random patterns.) A security expert had told me that detection of compromise was as important as prevention, so I experimented with ultraviolet powder on the dial of my safe in New York. (Photographing dust patterns under a UV flashlight beam turns out to be messy.) I kept my digital notes in multiple encrypted volumes, arranging the files in such a way that I had to type five long passwords just to start work every day.

At a farewell party for Anne Kornblut, who oversaw the *Post*'s Snowden coverage, my colleagues put on a skit that purported to depict our story meetings. The reporter Carol Leonnig, playing the role of Anne, pulled out blindfolds for everyone in the pretend meeting. They had to cover their eyes, she explained, before Bart could speak. Funny and fair, I had to admit. I was a giant pain in the ass.

But I felt I had to be, and my fear was that any single barrier could be breached. A friend who runs a lock and safe company told me that an expert safecracker could break into just about any commercial vault in less than 20 minutes. Intelligence agencies have whole departments working on how to stealthily circumvent barriers and seals. Special antennae can read the emanations of a computer monitor through walls. Against adversaries like this, all I could do was make myself a less appealing target. I layered on so many defenses that navigating through them became a chronic drain on my time, mental energy, and emotional equilibrium.

Years later Richard Ledgett, who oversaw the NSA's media-leaks task force and went on to become the agency's deputy director, told me matter-of-factly to assume that my defenses had been breached. "My take is, whatever you guys had was pretty immediately in the hands of any foreign intelligence service that wanted it," he said, "whether it was Russians, Chinese, French, the Israelis, the Brits. Between you, Poitras, and Greenwald, pretty sure you guys can't stand up to a full-fledged nation-state attempt to exploit your IT. To include not just remote stuff, but hands-on, sneak-into-your-house-at-night kind of stuff. That's my guess." Because I'd been one of Snowden's principal interlocutors, Ledgett told me he was sure there was "a nice dossier" on me in both Russia and China.

"If some of those services want you, they're going to get you. As an individual person, you're not going to be able to do much about that."

ON JANUARY 29, 2014, James Clapper, then the director of national intelligence, sat down at a Senate witness table to deliver his annual assessment of worldwide threats, covering the gravest dangers facing the United States. He did not open his remarks with terrorism or nuclear proliferation or Russia or China. He opened with Edward Snowden, and within a few words he was quoting one of my stories. "Snowden claims that he's won and that his mission is accomplished," Clapper said. "If that is so, I call on him and his accomplices to facilitate the return of the remaining stolen documents that have not yet been exposed, to prevent even more damage to U.S. security."

I pretty much stopped listening after the word *accomplices*. This was not an off-the-cuff remark. It was prepared testimony on behalf of the Obama administration, vetted across multiple departments, including Justice. *Accomplice* has a meaning in criminal law.

"I had in mind Glenn Greenwald or Laura Poitras," Clapper told me years later. "They conspired with him, they helped him in protecting his security and disseminating selectively what he had, so to me they are co-conspirators."

"I wouldn't distinguish myself categorically from them," I said.

"Well, then maybe you are too. This is the whole business about one man's whistleblower is another man's spy."

I asked Clapper whether I was a valid counterintelligence target.

"Theoretically you could be," Clapper said. "Given how Snowden is viewed by the intelligence community, someone who's in league with him, conspiring with him, that's a valid counterintelligence—and for that matter law-enforcement—target."

Twice in February 2014, George Ellard, then the NSA inspector general, referred to journalists on the story as Snowden's "agents." We had done more damage, he said at a Georgetown University conference, than the notorious FBI traitor Robert Hanssen, who'd helped Soviet security services hunt down and kill U.S. intelligence assets.

It became a running joke among U.S. officials that Bart Gellman should watch his back. In May 2014, I appeared on a panel alongside Robert Mueller, the former FBI director, to talk about Snowden. Mueller cross-examined me: Were the NSA documents not lawfully classified? Were they not stolen? Did I not publish them anyway? I held out my arms toward him, wrists together, as if for handcuffs. The audience laughed. Mueller did not.

I KNOW PERFECTLY WELL that government agencies prefer not to read their secrets on the front page. Sometimes they resent a story enough to investigate. *How in the blazes did the reporter find that out?* In serious cases maybe the Justice Department steps in. I knew all that—but despite years of reporting on government secrets, I had not often experienced it personally. So, in the summer of 2013, when I came across my own name in the NSA archive Snowden had shared with me, I gawped at the screen and bit back an impulse to swear.

The document with my name on it was part of an NSA memo for the attorney general of the United States about "unauthorized disclosures … of high-level concern to U.S. policy makers," referring in part to three *Washington Post* stories of mine about an intelligence operation gone wrong in the aftermath of the Gulf War. Reading the Snowden files, I learned that my reporting had been referred to the Justice Department for criminal investigation in early 1999. The FBI had been put on the case. I'd had no inkling at the time. How much did the bureau find out about me and my confidential sources? The memo did not say. No harm, as far as I knew, had come to my sources, but I realized that for some I could not really say. It had been a long time.

The most intriguing part of the memo was the framing of the harm that the NSA ascribed to my stories. "Press leaks could result in our adversaries implementing Denial and Deception (D&D) practices," the agency wrote. If adversaries know how the United States spies on them, in other words, they can do a better job of covering their tracks. That is a legitimate concern. But good journalism sometimes exposes deception by the U.S. government itself—not only in tradecraft but in matters of basic policy and principle.

One whole folder in the Snowden archive was devoted not to foreign spies but to journalists and the people who gave us information. The memos and slide decks laid out the grave dangers posed by news reporting. They also sketched the beginnings of a plan to do something about it: Every file in the folder mentioned a cryptonym that seemed to be the cover name for an effort to track and trace journalistic leaks.

The first time I heard the name FIRSTFRUITS, years before the Snowden leak, a confidential source told me to search for it on the internet. All I turned up were ravings on blogs about spooky plots. The George W. Bush administration, according to these accounts, had an off-the-books spying program akin to the work of the East German Stasi. FIRSTFRUITS allegedly listened in on journalists, political dissenters, members of Congress, and other threats to the globalist order. In some versions of the story, the program marked its victims for arrest or assassination. As best I could tell, these stories all traced back to a series of posts by a man named Wayne Madsen, who has aptly been described as "a paranoid conspiracy theorist in the tradition of Alex Jones." I did a little bit of reading in these fever swamps and concluded that FIRSTFRUITS was a crank's dark fantasy.

Then came the day I found my name in the Snowden archive. Sixteen documents, including the one that talked about me, named FIRSTFRUITS as a counterintelligence database that tracked unauthorized disclosures in the news media. According to top-secret briefing materials prepared by Joseph J. Brand, a senior

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ftp>
bina mode to transfer files.

DIGITALGLOBE / GETTY

NSA official who was also among the leading advocates of a crackdown on leaks, FIRSTFRUITS got its name from the phrase *the fruits of our labor*. "Adversaries know more about SIGINT sources & methods today than ever before," Brand wrote. Some damaging disclosures came from the U.S. government's own official communications, he noted; other secrets were acquired by foreign spies. But "most often," Brand wrote, "these disclosures occur through the media." He listed four "flagrant media leakers": the *Post*, *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, and *The Washington Times*. The FIRSTFRUITS project aimed to "drastically reduce significant losses of collection capability" at journalists' hands.

In NSA parlance, exposure of a source or method of surveillance is a "cryptologic insecurity." If exposure leads to loss of intelligence collection, that is "impairment." I was fully prepared to believe that some leaks cause impairment, but Brand's accounting—like many of the government's public assertions—left something to be desired.

By far the most frequent accusation invoked in debates about whether journalists cause "impairment" to the U.S. government is that it was journalists' fault that the U.S. lost access to Osama bin Laden's satellite-phone communications in the late 1990s. It is hard to overstate the centrality of this episode to the intelligence community's lore about the news media. The accusation, as best as I can ascertain, was first made publicly in 2002 by then–White House Press Secretary Ari Fleischer. After a newspaper reported that the NSA could listen to Osama bin Laden on his satellite phone, as Fleischer put it, the al-Qaeda leader abandoned the device. President Bush and a long line of other officials reprised this assertion in the years to come.

But the tale of the busted satellite-phone surveillance is almost certainly untrue. The story in question said nothing about U.S. eavesdropping. And one day before it was published, the United States launched barrages of cruise missiles against al-Qaeda training camps in Afghanistan and a factory in Sudan, including a facility that bin Laden had recently visited. After this, bin Laden went deep underground, forswearing electronic communications that might give his location away. Blaming a news story for this development, rather than a close miss on bin Laden's life, strained all logic. Yet somehow it became an article of faith in the intelligence community.

In 2001, according to Brand's NSA documents, the agency "stood up" a staff of leak trackers, and the CIA director hired a contractor "to build [a] foreign knowledge database"—FIRSTFRUITS. One of its major purposes was to feed information about harmful news stories to the "Attorney General task force to investigate media leaks."

The FIRSTFRUITS project produced 49 "crime reports to DOJ," three of them involving me. The FBI, in turn, was left with a conundrum. What crime, exactly, was it being asked to investigate? Congress has never passed a law that squarely addresses unauthorized disclosures to reporters by public officials. The United States has no counterpart to the United Kingdom's Official Secrets Act. Government employees sign a pledge to protect classified information; if they break that pledge, they can lose their security clearance or their job. Those are civil penalties. When it comes to criminal law, they may be subject to charges of theft or unlawful possession of government property. The nearest analogy in the law, however, and the charge most commonly prosecuted in such cases, is espionage.

Some people will see a kind of sense in that. A secret has been spilled, and damage potentially done. From the NSA's point of view, a loss is a loss, regardless of whether a foreign adversary learns the secret from a spy or a published news report. Before the disclosure, the NSA had a valuable source or method. Afterward, it does not.

But in other ways, espionage is a terrible fit for a news-media leak. Talking to a journalist is hardly tantamount to spying. Spies steal American secrets on behalf of some other country. They hope our government, and the general public, never learn of the breach. They intend, as the Espionage Act defines the crime, for the information "to be used to the injury of the United States or to the advantage of [a] foreign nation." News sources, on the other hand, give information to reporters for the purpose of exposure to the public at large. They want everyone to know. They may have self-interested motives, but they commonly believe, rightly or wrongly, that their fellow citizens will benefit from the leak.

Yes, news sources have on occasion been tried and convicted of espionage—but in general forcing a whistleblower into the mold of a spy is disfiguring. If news is espionage, then George Ellard is right to call me an "agent" of the adversary, and James Clapper is right to call me an "accomplice." From that basis, deploying the government's most intrusive counterintelligence powers against a journalist is but a short step.

I've thought a lot over the years about what the public's "right to know" is in the context of national security. Clearly there are circumstances in which the careful journalistic disclosure of certain classified facts is the right thing to do.

What if the U.S. government deliberately exposed American troops to nuclear radiation in order to learn more about the medical effects? That really happened after World War II, and the public didn't learn about it until 1994. If reporters had known the truth in the '40s and '50s, should they have suppressed it?

What about if the U.S. government deliberately infected sex workers in Guatemala with gonorrhea and syphilis? That happened too, in wildly unethical experiments from 1946 to 1948, which the government did not fully acknowledge until 2010.

What if a classified military investigation found "numerous incidents of sadistic, blatant, and wanton criminal abuses" against foreign detainees, in violation of the Geneva Conventions and the Uniform Code of Military Justice? That happened at the Abu Ghraib prison in 2003. Much the same sequence of events, with classification stamps employed to conceal information that public officials could not or did not wish to justify, took place after the government tortured al-Qaeda suspects in secret prisons, authorized warrantless surveillance of U.S. citizens, and lied about intelligence on weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. These were history-making events, full of political and legal repercussions, but they were hidden from public scrutiny until news stories broke through barriers of classification.

At heart, national-security secrecy presents a conflict of core values: self-government and self-defense. If we do not know what our government is doing, we cannot hold it accountable. If we do know, our enemies know too. That can be dangerous. This is our predicament. Wartime heightens the case for secrecy because the value of security is at its peak. But secrecy is never more damaging to self-government than in wartime, because making war is the very paradigm of a political choice.

But our government clearly doesn't see it that way. Here are some facts I've learned, through Freedom of Information Act requests and a lawsuit I filed to enforce them, about various government actions that involve me. The Office of the Director of National Intelligence said it had completely withheld 435 documents about me, but its explanation was classified and my lawyers at the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press were not allowed to read it. Homeland Security personnel, I learned from one document, had produced a 76-page report of every international flight I'd taken since 1983. Customs inspectors had secretly searched my checked baggage when I returned from more than one overseas reporting trip. The reasons for and results of those searches were redacted. Hundreds of emails recorded behind-the-scenes reactions and internal debates about how to respond to my questions or stories. The government asked the court to withhold all of those on grounds of deliberative privilege.

I learned something else by way of FOIA. It turned out, according to internal government correspondence I received in the course of my lawsuit, that government spokesmen were forwarding my emails to the FBI. The NSA public-affairs shop subsumed its work entirely to law enforcement. The spokesmen did not even have to be asked. They volunteered. "Below please find correspondence between reporter Bart Gellman and NSA & ODNI public affairs," a senior intelligence official, whose name is redacted in the FOIA release, wrote on December 21, 2013, to a manager in the Office of the National Counterintelligence Executive, or NCIX. "In the email, Gellman references conversations he has with Edward Snowden … Are these emails useful for NCIX?"

The manager replied, "Yes, these types of correspondence are useful. We will ensure they get to the FBI investigations team."

According to an affidavit from David M. Hardy, the section chief in the FBI's Information Management Division, my name appears in files relating to "investigations of alleged federal criminal violations and counterterrorism, counterintelligence investigations of third party subjects." Not only the Snowden case, that is—*investigations* and *third-party subjects*, plural. Some of those files, Hardy said, may appear in an electronic-surveillance database that includes "all persons whose voices have been monitored." Turns out I wasn't being paranoid.

Equally unsettling were the redactions themselves and the reasons given for them. Even the names of the FBI files, Hardy told the court, would give too much away. The file names specify "non-public investigative techniques" and "non-public details about techniques and procedures that are otherwise known to the public." The FBI is especially concerned about protecting one unspecified intelligence-gathering method. "Its use in the specific context of this investigative case is not a publically known fact," Hardy wrote. The bureau wants to protect "the nature of the information gleaned by its use."

Those are not comforting words.

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The Case of the Phantom Papyrus

A renowned Oxford scholar claimed that he discovered a first-century gospel fragment whose text closely matched modern Bibles. Now he's facing allegations of antiquities theft, cover-up, and fraud.

By
Ariel
Sabar

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On the evening of February 1, 2012, more than 1,000 people crowded into an auditorium at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The event was a showdown between two scholars over an explosive question in biblical studies: Is the original text of the New Testament lost, or do today's Bibles contain the actual words—the "autographs"—of Jesus's earliest chroniclers?

On one side was Bart Ehrman, a UNC professor and atheist whose bestselling books argue that the oldest copies of Christian scripture are so inconsistent and incomplete—and so few in number—that the original words are beyond recovery. On the other was Daniel Wallace, a conservative scholar at Dallas Theological Seminary who believes that careful textual analysis can surface the New Testament's divinely inspired first draft.

They had debated twice before, but this time Wallace had a secret weapon: At the end of his opening statement, he announced that verses of the Gospel of Mark had just been discovered on a piece of papyrus from the first century.

As news went in the field of biblical studies, this was a bombshell. The papyrus would be the only known Christian manuscript from the century in which Jesus is said to have lived. Its verses, moreover, closely matched those in modern Bibles—evidence of the New Testament's reliability and a rebuke to liberal scholars who saw the good book not as God-given but as the messy work of generations of human hands, prone to invention and revision, mischief and mistake.

Wallace declined to name the expert who'd dated the papyrus to the first century—"I've been sworn to secrecy"—but assured the audience that his "reputation is unimpeachable. Many consider him to be the best papyrologist on the planet." The fragment, Wallace added, would appear in an academic book the next year.

Though he didn't mention it onstage, Wallace had recently joined something called the Green Scholars Initiative. The program was funded by the Green family, the evangelical billionaires who own the Hobby Lobby craft-store chain. It gave handpicked scholars access to the thousands of artifacts the family had collected for their Museum of the Bible, a soaring $500 million showplace that would open a few years later near the National Mall in Washington, D.C.

Wallace's ties to the Greens made it easy for observers to connect the dots: The Mark papyrus had to be one of the manuscripts the Greens had bought for their museum. And the papyrologist who worked out its first-century date had to be the world-renowned classicist Dirk Obbink. The Greens were known to have hired him as a consultant during their antiquities buying spree.

His enlistment had been a coup. A tall Nebraskan with a mop of sandy hair, Obbink was in his mid-40s in 2001 when the MacArthur Foundation awarded him a half-million-dollar genius grant. His technique for reassembling papyrus scrolls carbonized by the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in A.D. 79 was a feat of three-dimensional puzzle solving.

Sought by universities and cultural institutions the world over, Obbink taught at Columbia before leaving, in 1995, for Oxford, home to the world's largest collection of manuscripts from the ancient world: half a million papyri that a pair of young Oxford scholars had excavated in Egypt a century earlier. Obbink's post as a general editor of the collection—the media sometimes called him its "director," though officially no such title exists—made him one of his field's most powerful figures. Wallace had not overstated his qualifications.

But years passed with no news of this "first-century Mark," as the phantom manuscript came to be called. There was no book in 2013, no exhibit when the museum opened in 2017. Wallace's blog filled with hundreds of comments. "It has been 5 years," readers complained. "Hurry up!" One man simply quoted from the Book of Proverbs: "Expectation postponed makes the heart sick."

Yet in 2018, when Obbink finally published the fragment, it made certain hearts even sicker. The Greens would see their dreams of a first-century gospel dashed. The University of Oxford would be thrust into the news in a labyrinthine case of alleged antiquities theft, cover-up, and fraud. And one of the most illustrious figures in classics, though protesting his innocence, would find himself at the center of a trans-Atlantic investigation.

DIRK OBBINK HAD RUMMAGED for diamonds in the rough since his boyhood in Lincoln, Nebraska. In 2002, the year after he was awarded the MacArthur prize, his mother, Dorithy, told *Smithsonian* magazine that as a child her son had haunted thrift shops and the town dump, coming home with "a bunch of junk." His fascination with other people's trash carried into his years in New York, where he took his daughter dumpster diving.

That papyrology called to him was perhaps little wonder. Papyrus was the ancient world's paper, a disposable medium made of reeds harvested along the Nile. Its 1,000-year heyday as a writing surface coincided with the Greco-Roman era, the fall of the pharaohs, the birth of Christianity, and the advent of Islam. Obbink taught students how to mine the brownish, jigsaw-puzzle-like fragments for lost works of Greek literature and philosophy.

No collection came close to rivaling the one Obbink helped oversee at Oxford's Sackler Library. The Oxyrhynchus Papyri, named after the lost Egyptian

COURTESY OF THE EGYPT EXPLORATION SOCIETY AND THE UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD IMAGING PAPYRI PROJECT

city from whose ancient rubbish heaps they were excavated, contained forgotten works of Sophocles, Menander, and Sappho; love spells and horoscopes; early gospels and Greek translations of the Hebrew Bible. Deciphering the texts is so laborious—and oversight so strict—that just 1 percent of the fragments have been published since their discovery. As a decoder of crumbling, half-vanished manuscripts, Obbink was "an absolute master," his friend David Sider, an NYU classicist, told me.

When he gave students his attention, they found him mesmerizing. But Obbink was often as inscrutable as the texts he placed under his microscope. Despite boyish looks—an open face beneath a helmet of center-parted bangs—Obbink had a wooden air and monotone voice that struck some people as "cold" or, as one former student put it, "whatever the opposite of charisma is." He was "never quite there," another pupil said.

Sider learned not to ask personal questions. "He'd start to be vague," Sider told me, or "his eyes would start to look elsewhere." Friends tell a story from Obbink's graduate-school days at Stanford, when his then-wife returned to their small apartment to find a grand piano monopolizing the living room. "She said to him, 'Oh, I didn't know you played,'" a former colleague recalled. "He said, 'Well, you never asked.'"

There were surprises at work, too. In 2003, after eight years at Oxford, Obbink was hired by the University of Michigan for a tenured, full-time chair in papyrology at a salary of $105,000. Though he was eminently qualified, the offer was largely an effort to keep his new wife, an esteemed faculty member, at the school. The couple had a young child, and administrators were sympathetic to the strain a long-distance marriage would put on the family.

A few years later, a Michigan classicist named Ruth Scodel was perusing Oxford's course offerings when she came across a Greek-poetry class. Its teacher was a man she thought worked down the hall from her in Ann Arbor. "I went, *What?!*" Scodel recalled.

The revelation that he'd never stopped teaching at Oxford—despite the lengths to which Michigan had gone to help his family—eroded his decades-long friendship with Richard Janko, who'd chaired Michigan's classics department when Obbink was hired. "It shook my confidence in his character," Janko told me. (Obbink's lawyer says that both Oxford and Michigan "were aware and had given unequivocal contractual permission" for Obbink to hold a dual appointment.)

Obbink tweezed a fragment of Mark from its sheath. The shape and strokes of certain letters, he explained, were hallmarks of first-century handwriting.

On April 10, 2012, three weeks before he parted ways with the University of Michigan, Obbink visited the county clerk in Ann Arbor. He filed paperwork for a new business, listing its principal address as Room 2151 at 435 South State Street—his soon-to-be-former office in the Michigan classics department. The company's name, he wrote, was Oxford Ancient.

FOUNDED BY King Henry VIII in 1546, Christ Church is the most picturesque of the colleges that make up the University of Oxford. The poet W. H. Auden, the philosopher John Locke, and several British prime ministers were educated on its castlelike grounds, parts of which stand in for Hogwarts in the *Harry Potter* films.

One night in November 2011, two American evangelicals walked up a flight of stairs in a Gothic bell tower on Christ Church's central quad. Scott Carroll and Jerry Pattengale had been friends since their days together in a different Oxford—the city in southwest Ohio, where they each earned a doctorate in ancient history, at Miami University. Both had taught at Christian colleges and advised well-to-do collectors before Steve Green, the president of Hobby Lobby, hired them to lay the intellectual foundations for a national Bible museum.

Carroll was put in charge of acquisitions, a post that played to his self-image as an impresario called by God to summon texts from the farthest reaches of the globe. His cellphone's ringtone was the theme from *Indiana Jones*. A promotional photo, captioned GREAT SCOTT!, depicts him in shorts and a fedora, swinging through the jungle on a rope.

The more sober-tempered Pattengale was named executive director of education; his job was to establish the Green Scholars Initiative, recruiting world-class academics to mentor the students the Greens would invite to research their fast-growing collection.

At the top of the stairs that evening, Dirk Obbink opened a black door and let the two men into his office, a suite of rooms with a kitchen, a bathroom, and a pair of mummy masks that gazed at visitors from across a pool table. By then he'd been on the Hobby Lobby payroll for about a year. For Carroll, he vetted manuscripts that dealers across the world were clamoring to sell to the Greens. For Pattengale, he would teach papyrology to Green Scholars at summer seminars.

They spent an hour discussing Obbink's latest work. Then, as Carroll and Pattengale stood to leave, Obbink called to them, as if stopped by a stray thought. "Well, wait a minute," he said. "I have something here you might be interested in." He padded behind the pool table and opened a manila folder.

Inside, in plastic sleeves, were ancient pieces from each of the four New Testament Gospels. Obbink tweezed out a fragment of Mark—a small, hatchet-shaped papyrus with verses from the gospel's first chapter—for his visitors to see. The shape and strokes of certain letters, he explained, were hallmarks of first-century handwriting. Obbink described the fragment as part of a "family collection" and, according to Carroll, "offered it for consideration" for Hobby Lobby to buy.

Pattengale felt momentarily paralyzed, while Carroll paced the room, delirious. Everything they'd worked on up to that point seemed to suddenly pale.

When Pattengale flew home to Indiana the next day, "I told my wife, Cindy, 'If this proves to be first-century, I may be involved in researching one of the most important pieces of the Bible ever discovered.'"

STEVE GREEN HAD LOOSED tidal forces when he entered the antiquities market in 2009. He was a motivated, first-time buyer with millions to burn in the midst of a global recession. Strangers bearing ancient scrolls, oil lamps, and incunabula approached museum officials unbidden at restaurants, college lecture halls, even supermarkets.

One would-be seller claimed to have a 5,000-year-old Bible that had been perfectly preserved in ice atop Mount Ararat. Another brought a box of manuscripts to the parking lot of a Cattlemen's Steakhouse near Hobby Lobby headquarters, in Oklahoma City. When Carroll rebuffed him, the dealer set the box on the trunk of Carroll's car, then dashed off, yelling, "You'll love these. Call me!"

In five years, Green acquired more than 40,000 artifacts, from cuneiform tablets and Dead Sea Scrolls to Jewish Torahs and early-American Bibles. But he wasn't indiscriminate. "We're buyers of items to tell the story," Green once said. And the story of Christianity he wanted to tell was of the Bible as a God-given record of "absolute authority and reliability."

TOP: GERAINT LEWIS; BOTTOM: ALEX RAMSAY / ALAMY

`Dirk Obbink` | `2005`

The scholar examines an ancient manuscript at the University of Oxford, home to the world's largest collection of papyri.

`Christ Church College` | `Founded in 1546`

Parts of its grounds, the most picturesque on the Oxford campus, stand in for Hogwarts in the Harry Potter *films.*

The Greens didn't want another Creation Museum or Noah's Ark theme park. They envisioned a "Christian Smithsonian," as the scholars Candida Moss and Joel Baden described it in their book *Bible Nation*—an elegantly designed, intellectually serious institution that chronicled the Bible as a profoundly influential historical manuscript.

But secular scholars had doubts. Even before it opened its doors, some critics regarded the Museum of the Bible as little more than a dressed-up version of the many evangelical causes the Greens poured their wealth into—a ministry, in all but name, that cast the New Testament as the unfiltered word of God and America as a Protestant nation. Its detractors saw the Greens as too invested in a particular set of religious beliefs to present the Bible's many texts and traditions dispassionately.

Obbink was part of the museum's answer to such criticisms. He was so towering a scholar that the Greens could counter accusations of religious bias simply by citing his involvement. He was, in Carroll's words, "a person that has no agenda whatsoever." When it came to papyrus—the predominant writing surface at the dawn of Christianity—the Greens could point to Obbink as an impartial arbiter, someone who could tell the honest brokers from the hucksters, the great finds from the fakes.

According to friends, Obbink displayed no obvious religious convictions. Nor did he have much patience for people whose faith skewed their judgment. "People try to date [Oxyrhynchus papyri] earlier than they really are, because they want Christianity to start earlier than it does," Obbink told a New Zealand magazine in 2005.

But something happened in the presence of his new patrons. He fawned over the Greens' aspirations, writing to Scott Carroll in January 2010 that he looked forward "to the flourishing of your commendable undertaking." He closed emails, as his new benefactors did, with the sign-off "Blessings." And according to a devout former museum official, he bowed his head and prayed before meals in so "theatrical" a way that, even among evangelicals, he was "the most visibly pious person at the table."

IN EARLY 2012, a few months after their meeting at Christ Church, Obbink invited Pattengale to London to show him a batch of papyri that had come up for sale. The men were steps from Sotheby's—where Pattengale thought they were going—when Obbink turned down a narrow alley to the small, cluttered apartment of a 30-something Turk, who answered the door in a Yankees jersey.

Pattengale would later learn that the man, a dealer named Yakup Eksioglu, was suspected by scholars of illicitly trafficking papyri. Eksioglu had begun selling antiquities on eBay, under a series of usernames, in 2008, around the time social-media accounts placed him in Egypt. When Roberta Mazza, an Italian papyrologist, grilled Eksioglu about the source of his fragments in 2017, Eksioglu threatened her. "Always look at the back when you walk," he wrote in a WhatsApp chat she later sent me. He alluded to an attack in Europe in which acid had been thrown in victims' faces. (Eksioglu says that his antiquities business is fully legal and that if threats to Mazza came from his phone, they were perhaps sent by some students he knew, as "humor.")

Eksioglu talked on his cellphone behind a beaded curtain as Obbink showed Pattengale a sixth-century Coptic fragment from First Corinthians, for which Eksioglu wanted $1 million. Almost as odd as the meeting's setting, Pattengale told me, was Obbink's eagerness for the Greens to buy: "He contacted me not long afterwards to see if we were moving forward, and wondered why we weren't, and couldn't believe we weren't."

Steve Green
Scott Carroll
2010

The Hobby Lobby president (left) *hired Carroll to help him build a collection of artifacts. Here they're holding a copy of the Ethiopic Gospels from the 14th century.*

Scott Carroll
Dirk Obbink
Jerry Pattengale
Circa 2011

All three men worked for the Green family. Obbink (center) *helped Carroll* (left) *vet artifacts and taught papyrology seminars for a program Pattengale led.*

PROFESSOR JEFF FISH was in his office at Baylor University in Waco, Texas, in the fall of 2010 when he got a voicemail. The caller was someone named Scott Carroll, who asked whether Fish and his students might like to study papyri from the Green Collection.

Fish had never heard of Carroll or the Greens, much less any new cache of unstudied manuscripts. He might have written the whole thing off as some kind of prank had Carroll not dropped the name Dirk Obbink.

Fish revered the Oxford professor, as much for his scholarship as for the role he'd played in Fish's own career. Fish had been foundering on his doctoral thesis at the University of Texas in the 1990s when Obbink—with whom he'd taken a summer papyrology class at Oxford—steered him toward a new topic and opened doors to closely guarded Italian papyri.

That someone of Obbink's renown might partner with a scholar Fish had never even heard of was almost unbelievable. Fish wrote to his old mentor to see whether any of it was true.

"It would be great if we could work together with Scott Carroll on this," Obbink replied. "I recommend him to you highly."

Though Fish didn't know it, Baylor's Institute for Studies of Religion had already signed on as the home of the Green Scholars Initiative. Baylor administrators were smitten enough with Carroll—and the excitement the Green Collection was generating among students—that they offered him a $100,000 annual stipend and the title "research professor," though he taught no courses and published no research.

Carroll struck many Baylor professors as less scholar than ringmaster—or "circus act," as one put it. He showed up with suitcases full of antiquities, passing them around to astonished professors and students. But nothing made more of an impression than the macabre show he would put on in the classics-department lounge.

In the age of the pharaohs, mummified corpses were fitted with masks made of cartonnage, a kind of papier-mâché fashioned from plaster, linen, and discarded papyrus. Nineteenth-century archaeologists discovered that papyri could be extracted from the masks by dissolving the plaster, then carefully peeling apart the wadded texts.

The technique—known as "dismounting"—was clever. But because the ancients made cartonnage from waste papyrus (receipts, notes, and other ephemera), it produced few major literary discoveries. The likelihood of Christian finds

TOP: MARK GRAHAM / *THE NEW YORK TIMES* / REDUX

was almost nil: Egyptians had ceased using papyri in mummy masks before Jesus's day. By the 1960s, the practice of dissolving another culture's death masks on the off chance of finding a manuscript had been all but abandoned, as much for ethical reasons as for the lackluster results.

Scott Carroll, however, presented himself as a modern-day maestro. Where others found dreck, he found gold. "Everything has to be done just right," including water temperature, drying technique, and the particulars of "enzyme action," he once told a seminary audience. "I dare someone to try to do it on their own, because they'll waste hundreds of thousands of dollars if they don't know the process."

On January 16, 2012, Carroll gave Baylor a glimpse of how it was done. He filled a sink in the classics lounge with warm water and Palmolive dish soap, plunged a mummy mask into the suds, and began swishing it around. Then he withdrew a wet fragment and presented it to awestruck students.

"He said, 'Whoa, now take a look at this, and see if you can read it,'" recalled David Lyle Jeffrey, a medieval-Bible scholar and former Baylor provost who helped manage the school's relationship with the Greens. The fragment turned out to be a piece of Paul's Letter to the Romans. "The kids were bamboozled: 'Wow! Wow!'" It was the kind of eureka moment any professor might hope to inspire in undergraduates.

Jeffrey might have been just as floored, were it not for something he'd noticed when students were first gathering in the room.

Before his demonstration, Carroll had discreetly set a piece of papyrus beside the sink, and Jeffrey had glanced at it. When Carroll withdrew the wet Romans fragment from the mummy mask, Jeffrey recognized it as the piece he'd seen beside the sink. Carroll, he realized, had only pretended to pull it from the mask.

Two days later, Hobby Lobby President Steve Green went on CNN to talk about the Romans fragment, which he presented as the oldest known copy of the Pauline epistle. "This has just been discovered in the past 48 hours," Green said. In truth, an internal review of sales records would later conclude, Hobby Lobby had purchased it 18 months earlier—from Dirk Obbink.

Carroll filled a sink with warm water and Palmolive, plunged a mummy mask into the suds, and began swishing it around. Then he withdrew a wet fragment.

Though it wasn't publicly known, Obbink served as more than just an academic consultant to the Greens: Josephine Dru, a former papyrus curator for the Museum of the Bible, told me he was one of their biggest suppliers of papyri. From January 2010 to February 2013, Obbink sold the family more than 150 papyrus fragments—for a total of between $4 million and $8 million, according to a source who has seen the figures and described them to me as a range. (Jeffrey Kloha, the Museum of the Bible's chief curator, didn't dispute those numbers, but estimated a total closer to the low end of that range.)

Scott Carroll may have claimed that Obbink had "no agenda whatsoever," but in fact Obbink had several. He was acting as a scholar, an adviser, and a seller: The first owed allegiance to the truth, the second to his clients, the third to his own bottom line.

SIMON BURRIS, who taught Greek poetry at Baylor, had shown up at the mummy-mask dissolving that January less out of scholarly interest than to take part in the life of the department; lecturers like him did well to show their faces to the tenured faculty who decided whether to renew their annual teaching contracts.

Burris found a spot at a table where Carroll was drying papyri he'd pulled out of the sink, but soon felt his head spinning. Before him was a small Greek fragment with four-line stanzas in an Aeolic dialect—a hallmark of Sappho, the sixth-century B.C. poet from the island of Lesbos, famed for her passionate depictions of love. Sappho is as revered by classicists as her writings are scarce; just one complete poem and fragments of some others survive, many of them from Oxyrhynchus.

Burris quickly spotted other pieces—still wet—bearing the same Sapphic markers. He ran their surviving words through a search engine: They not only overlapped with known Sappho poems, but filled in previously unknown lines.

"I was gobsmacked," Burris told me. "I think I said an expletive or two—'holy moly,' except without the *moly*." He remembers Carroll glancing at him with a grin: "Oh, did you find something?" The lounge became standing-room-only. Burris gave an impromptu speech about the poet's work. One professor was in tears.

Burris was a lecturer with relatively few publications. But here he was, making a find worthy of international headlines. For all kinds of reasons, he wanted to believe it.

But something felt off. The Sappho pieces had been laid out in such a way that even a non–Sappho expert like him could spot several in just minutes. (He would eventually discover some 20 of them.) He wondered: Did Carroll somehow know what was in the mask before he'd disemboweled it?

"I am presently in contact with our PR firm" in hopes of "a press release on this," Carroll wrote to students later that day. But no press release came, and miraculously, word of Burris's find never leaked.

Two months later, according to Jeffrey, Carroll told Baylor that if it wanted continued access to the Green Collection, he'd need a bigger paycheck. (Carroll says he never asked for a raise and that Jeffrey was simply unhappy with how much Baylor was already paying him.)

The jarring request, together with his concerns about the mummy masks, prompted Jeffrey to take a closer look at Carroll's résumé. He discovered that half a dozen books Carroll claimed to have written didn't actually exist.

Carroll was fired by Baylor and the Greens in May 2012, but by then they no longer needed him. Both had begun strengthening ties to an Oxford professor who couldn't have seemed more different.

IN MOST RESPECTS, Obbink was indeed Carroll's opposite: a professor at one of the world's most prestigious universities, aloof, reserved.

Yet in the decade after Obbink's genius grant, a view had taken hold among some colleagues that he'd failed to live up to the high expectations. Some thought he'd spread himself too thin, chasing every short-lived opportunity rather than pursuing the sort of single-minded research that had produced *Philodemus on Piety: Part 1*, the 1996 opus that had vaulted him to the highest echelon of classical scholarship. The MacArthur Foundation had noted that Part 2 was due out in 2003. Seventeen years later, it remains unpublished.

He struggled even to finish articles. In a crowded elevator at a classics conference, when one academic editor jokingly asked how many others were waiting for a piece of writing from Obbink, half the hands went up.

As the years passed, Obbink seemed more interested in monetizing his work—a common enough practice in the sciences, but rare in the humanities. In 2011, he founded a start-up with Chinese entrepreneurs and Oxford seed money to design desktop manuscript scanners, an enterprise that U.K. business records show has hemorrhaged money. (Pattengale told me that boxes of the scanners were piled, unsold, along the walls of Obbink's office.) In 2012 came Oxford Ancient, and in 2014, an antiquities business called Castle Folio, which he co-founded with a Michigan man named Mahmoud Elder.

> Sources told me that some of the Sappho pieces Burris "found" are visible in photos dated more than a month before Carroll pulled them from the soapy water at Baylor.

By 2013, the Museum of the Bible was paying Obbink $6,000 a month, twice the top rate for other academics in its scholars initiative.

At events sponsored by the Greens, Obbink, at times in a white lab coat, dunked wedges of mummy cartonnage in soapy water. "He says, 'This is what scholars do,'" recalled Jeremiah Coogan, a student who attended one. "We got this spiel about 'This is where you discover New Testament papyri'"—a line that Coogan, like other scholars, soon recognized as dubious.

Obbink had once kept hundreds of Oxford's uncataloged mummy masks in his rooms, as a favor to the university, which was short on storage. But a longtime colleague told me he'd never seen Obbink perform a dismounting. "This sort of thing never took place in his university teaching."

Not that Obbink hadn't thought about it. In a German newspaper interview in 2005, he'd fantasized about the potential bounty of poems and plays. But, as the newspaper reported, "experts no longer use such methods." Five years later, Obbink appeared to have abandoned any qualms: "Suitable for dismantling/dissolving," he wrote in the sales paperwork for a mask Hobby Lobby bought from him in 2010.

It was one of some 20 masks Obbink sold the Greens. A source who has seen the figures told me that on top of the $4 million to $8 million he charged for papyri, the family paid him $1 million to $2 million for a host of other antiquities. Among them was a medieval Latin manuscript titled "On Stolen Things."

IN EARLY 2014, headlines appeared across the world: Obbink had discovered a pair of breathtaking new Sappho poems—on a piece of papyrus salvaged from a mummy mask. "For a couple of months, it was just me and a girl named Sappho—nothing between me and the text," Obbink said on BBC Radio. "It was like being shipwrecked on a desert island with Marilyn Monroe."

But Obbink declined to name the papyrus's owner or to release its provenance paperwork. In a *New York Times* op-ed, Douglas Boin, a historian at Saint Louis University, called Obbink's secrecy "disturbingly tone deaf" at a time of "catastrophic" looting in the Middle East. The next year, Christie's produced a 26-page brochure offering the two Sappho poems for sale "by private treaty," a transaction in which an auction house quietly approaches prospective buyers rather than hosting a public sale.

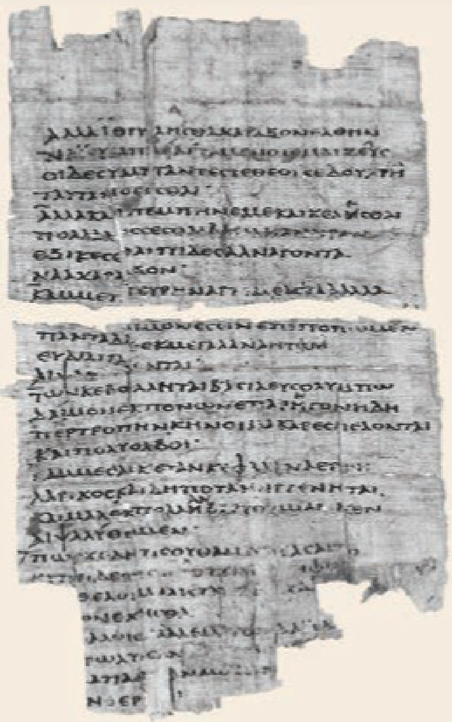
Obbink eventually told a convoluted tale about an anonymous London businessman who had bought cartonnage at a Christie's auction in 2011, dissolved it, and brought extracted papyri to Obbink, who discovered the two Sappho poems. The businessman then put some 20 small scraps that had also been pulled from the cartonnage—"being not easily identified … and deemed insignificant"—on the market. By chance, an intermediary dealer sold them to the Green Collection, where Obbink picked them out as yet more Sappho.

Brent Nongbri, a Christian-manuscripts scholar, has identified no fewer than six different accounts of provenance put forward by Obbink, Carroll, or Bettany Hughes—a British broadcaster who has featured Obbink on several of her TV and radio shows. None of those accounts included the one detail witnessed by a large group of people: Simon Burris's identification of the smaller Sappho pieces in Baylor's crowded classics-department lounge in 2012.

Sources close to the Greens told me that some of the Sappho pieces Burris "found" that day are visible in photos dated December 7, 2011, more than a month before Carroll pulled them from the soapy water at Baylor. The images appear in an invoice for papyri that the Greens bought on January 7, 2012. The seller was Yakup Eksioglu.

In a WhatsApp chat this February, Eksioglu told me that he was, indeed, the source for all the Sappho fragments—the 20 small pieces "discovered" at Baylor, and the large sheet with the two new poems. The claim that they had come from cartonnage purchased at a Christie's auction in 2011 was a "fake story," he said. When I asked why some of the pieces looked, in photos, like they had been embedded in cartonnage, he suggested that they had been staged: "This is a very simple method, you can do it by wetting." Eksioglu said the Sapphos had belonged to his "family collection" for at least a century.

When I asked for corroboration, he said he didn't want to bother his relatives and that in any case no one but him knew anything about it. In our many exchanges, Eksioglu trafficked in conspiracy theories and made statements that he later acknowledged were lies. But even if only the documented claims are true—that he sold the Greens the smaller Sappho scraps—they expose Carroll's Baylor demonstration as a con and discredit key parts of Obbink's provenance story.



Sappho poems on papyrus | Circa third century A.D.

News that Obbink had discovered two new Sappho poems made headlines around the world.

Mummy mask | Ancient Egypt

The practice of dissolving mummy masks in search of manuscripts had been all but abandoned before Scott Carroll and Dirk Obbink announced astonishing finds.

BOTTOM: GERAINT LEWIS

When I told Carroll what I'd discovered, he acknowledged planting the Sappho and Romans fragments in the mask at Baylor that day. His aim, he said, was to teach students how to identify papyri, not how to dismount a mask. Unsure of what he'd recover from the mask, he decided to mix in some exciting pieces from the Green Collection. "At the time, I didn't feel that it was duplicitous."

Representatives for the Greens knew long ago that Eksioglu was the source of the new Sapphos. But they stayed mum even as questions mounted. "It's interesting that hardly any Sappho has surfaced for decades and now there's plenty," one senior Museum of the Bible official wrote to two others on July 11, 2012. Of Eksioglu, the official added, "You're likely both aware that he's been the main conduit for much of the best stuff surfacing."

"There-in is the potential issue," one of them replied. "Where is it coming from?"

THOUGH HOUSED AT OXFORD, the Oxyrhynchus Papyri are owned by the Egypt Exploration Society, the London charity that financed their excavation. Public criticism of Obbink's Sappho dealings deeply unsettled the EES; the collection's general editors weren't supposed to have anything to do with buyers or sellers of antiquities. At a meeting in London in July 2014, EES officials gave Obbink an ultimatum: Cut ties with the Greens or lose his editorship.

That night, after Obbink returned to Oxford, he went to the hotel where Jerry Pattengale and Steve Green were staying during a summer session of the Green Scholars Initiative. They took seats on an outdoor patio, and Obbink told them of the EES's mandate.

"He was sweating profusely," Pattengale recalled. If the EES shut Obbink out of the Oxyrhynchus Papyri, he would lose the raison d'être for his position at Oxford—and maybe his position along with it.

Pattengale pitched the Greens on endowing a chair for Obbink at Oxford, to keep him at the university even if he lost access to the collection. "This was simply to treat someone well who had been so helpful," Pattengale told me. But he was overruled; Cary Summers, then president of the Museum of the Bible, saw a faculty job for Obbink at Baylor as a better contingency plan. "It was disingenuous," Pattengale told me. "It would be the museum funding Baylor to fund him"—masking his ties to the Greens and thereby maintaining his access to the Oxyrhynchus collection, even if he spent part of the year in Texas. (Summers did not respond to multiple interview requests.)

Obbink told the EES that he'd broken with the Greens. In truth, sources told me, the Museum of the Bible continued to finance his projects and pay him the $6,000-a-month stipend. If the EES found out, Obbink might need a new job, fast.

In September 2014, two months after the EES ultimatum, Obbink bought a faux medieval castle a short drive from the Baylor campus. Fish, the Baylor classicist, was dumbfounded.

The 124-year-old Cottonland Castle, built of sandstone, Carrara marble, and Honduran mahogany, was a wholly out-of-place structure, bordered by a used-car lot and blighted by water damage and graffiti. When I visited Waco last fall, people told me that teenagers had a Halloween tradition of breaking into the vacant building and sneaking through the dark to its top floor.

Did Obbink plan to live in the castle? Was he hoping that a showy display of civic goodwill—the restoration of a notorious Waco eyesore—would improve his prospects for a full-time job offer from Baylor? No one at the university seemed to know.

"I think it reminded him of Oxford," Tom Lupfer, the renovator Obbink hired, told me. Lupfer showed me the plans: underground garage, elevator, spiral staircase leading from sundeck to swimming pool, pool house with changing rooms. Lupfer warned Obbink that the work would take a few years and cost as much as $1.4 million. Obbink didn't flinch, but Lupfer wondered how anyone on an academic salary could afford such extravagance.

IN NOVEMBER 2015, a video appeared on YouTube, filmed on a smartphone from the pews of a church in Charlotte, North Carolina. From the pulpit, where he was addressing a conference of conservative Christians, Scott Carroll spoke of seeing a Gospel of Mark from the first century "at Oxford University at Christ Church College … in the possession of an outstanding, well-known, eminent classicist … Dirk Obbink," who thought the papyrus might date to as early as A.D. 70—the same year most scholars think the gospel was first composed.

This was no longer Daniel Wallace telling a vague, secondhand story on a debate stage. This was an eyewitness with names, dates, and places. The video so unnerved the Egypt Exploration Society that it began a review of all its unpublished New Testament papyri. It learned that one of Obbink's researchers had found a small fragment of Mark in its collection in 2011, a piece photographed by a curator as early as the 1980s but never before identified.

Was this the discovery that Wallace had announced at the University of North Carolina—and that Carroll had confirmed in the church video nearly four years later?

Confronted by the EES, Obbink admitted to having a fragment of Mark from Oxyrhynchus in his office and showing it to Carroll. But he insisted that he'd never said it was for sale. The EES instructed him "to prepare it for publication as soon as practicable in order to avoid further speculation about its date and content."

Obbink could no doubt foresee the consequences of publication: The moment images of the fragment became public, Pattengale, Carroll, and Wallace would recognize the papyrus as the one he'd allegedly offered to the Greens half a decade earlier. They would notice he'd published it in the official book series for EES papyri—exposing it as never his to sell. Perhaps most distressing, they'd see Obbink's new dating: In a book of serious scholarship, he'd assign their supposed "first-century Mark" to the late second or early third century, making it far less remarkable.

In 2016, the EES declined to renew Obbink's position as general editor and took away his key to the papyrus room. He could no longer work there unless supervised by Daniela Colomo, the collection's curator. The next year, as the deadline for Obbink's editio princeps approached, it looked to his editors as though he might never finish. Unwilling to brook further delay, the EES enlisted Colomo and the collection's researcher, Ben Henry, to complete it for him.

Meanwhile, new curators at the Museum of the Bible began making disquieting discoveries about the Greens' papyri. David Trobisch, who directed the museum's collection, called Eksioglu while on business in Istanbul. The dealer picked Trobisch up at his hotel at 2 a.m., drove him to a high-rise apartment, and plied him with cigars and whiskey. Trobisch asked where Eksioglu had gotten the papyri he sold the Greens. "He had no records, there was nothing, he couldn't help me," Trobisch told me.

But Eksioglu hoped Trobisch could help *him*. The dealer set cardboard boxes containing at least 1,000 fragments of papyri on his kitchen table, in hopes of another sale. "Where is it from?" Trobisch asked. Eksioglu mumbled something about war and Syria, then mimicked locals stubbing their toes into the ground, stumbling on antiquities.

"This is over," Trobisch replied. (Eksioglu denies meeting Trobisch, and says that a student had gone in his stead.)

Later that day, when Trobisch met with another of the Greens' Turkish papyrus suppliers, "he wanted to know whether I came with the police."

In December 2017, Trobisch and his soon-to-be-successor, Jeffrey Kloha, traveled to Oxford to ask Obbink about the sources of his papyri. "He said he didn't have [the provenance paperwork] in his office, he would check later, he would forward them to me later," Kloha told me. "He never produced anything." The Greens broke all ties with Obbink the next month.

When the Mark fragment was finally published, in April 2018, in the book *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri Vol. LXXXIII*, it ignited exactly the scholarly firestorm anyone might have predicted. On his influential blog, Brent Nongbri wrote, wryly, "Seems like there is a bit more to the story."

IN JUNE 2019, Michael Holmes, who replaced Pattengale as the director of the scholars initiative, flew to London to meet with leaders of the Egypt Exploration Society, who remained skeptical that Obbink, whatever his other shortcomings, might have sold Oxyrhynchus papyri.

Over lunch at a private club, Holmes pulled out a purchase agreement between Hobby Lobby Stores Inc. and Dirk Obbink. Co-signed by the Oxford professor on February 4, 2013, it showed that Obbink had sold the company not just the Mark papyrus, but also fragments of the Gospels of Matthew, Luke, and John. In the contract, Obbink describes the manuscripts as his personal property, vows to “ship/hand carry” them from “Oxford Ancient,” and dates all four to a historically unprecedented “circa 100 AD,” making each a one-of-a-kind worth millions.

When EES officials saw the contract, Holmes told me, “any uncertainties they had evaporated very quickly.” They banned Obbink from the collection.

The Museum of the Bible began sending to the EES images of every papyrus the Greens had purchased—from any seller. Comparing them against the society’s own photographic inventory, EES officials spotted 13 of its biblical fragments. From written descriptions provided by Hobby Lobby, it identified four more: the gospels that Obbink’s sales contract dated to the first century, though none, the EES said, were in fact that old.

Fifteen of the EES’s fragments had been sold to the Greens by Obbink, for more than $1.5 million, a source who has seen the figures told me. Among them was the Romans scrap Carroll pretended to pull from a mummy mask at Baylor in 2012.

The Greens bought the two other EES fragments from the family business of Alan Baidun, a Jerusalem dealer who appeared to have acted as a middleman for Obbink. (Baidun did not answer multiple emails and phone calls, but has previously denied wrongdoing through a spokesperson.)

The EES soon discovered another half-dozen of its papyri in the collection of a wealthy California collector named Andrew Stimer, who had previously sold the Greens four Dead Sea Scrolls that the Museum of the Bible later deemed forgeries. (Stimer disputes the museum’s forgery findings.)

Obbink had sold Hobby Lobby not just the Mark papyrus, but also fragments of the Gospels of Matthew, Luke, and John. He dated all four to “circa 100 AD.”

Stimer, who leads an evangelical ministry called Hope Partners International, said he purchased two of the fragments in 2015 from a “Mr. M. Elder of Dearborn, Michigan,” a seeming match for Obbink’s business partner. When scholars saw images of those fragments—from Romans and First Corinthians—they realized the Museum of the Bible owned adjoining pieces from the same leaves. Someone appeared to have cut up scriptures that, according to EES photos, had been intact at Oxford. “Mr. M. Elder” had sold one pair of cuts to Stimer, and Obbink had sold the other to the Greens. (Mahmoud Elder declined to comment, invoking what he called a “client nondisclosure agreement.”)

An inventory of Stimer’s collection, provided to me by a source, states that two other papyri—from Exodus and Psalms—had been “deaccessioned,” or sold off, by seminaries in Berkeley, California, and Dayton, Ohio. It was a lie: Both fragments belonged to the EES. (Stimer told me he was “blindsided,” has returned the EES fragments, and is trying to recover the “substantial sums” he paid. Obbink, he said, had listed the Berkeley and Dayton seminaries as their source in a scholarly report that came with the purchase.)

For most of the stolen papyri, the EES’s corresponding inventory cards and photographs were also missing. The thief, it seemed, had sought to cover his tracks by erasing evidence of the papyri’s existence. In a collection of some half a million pieces, perhaps they’d never be missed.

But the thief miscalculated: Copies of the inventory existed in various locations, including University College London.

Drawing on such backups, the EES said it has so far identified 120 papyri that “appear to be missing, almost all from a limited number of folders.” In what might well be British understatement, it warned “that a few more cases may emerge.”

On November 12, the EES reported its findings to the Thames Valley Police. On March 2, the police detained Obbink for questioning on suspicion of theft and fraud. As of press time, no charges had been filed.

“THE ALLEGATIONS MADE against me that I have stolen, removed or sold items owned by the Egyptian Exploration Society collection at the University of Oxford are entirely false,” Obbink said in a statement this past October, four days after the EES and the Museum of the Bible announced the results of a preliminary joint investigation. “I would never betray the trust of my colleagues and the values which I have sought to protect and uphold throughout my academic career in the way that has been alleged." He hinted, darkly, that he may have been framed, but declined to elaborate.

A few days later, in the second week of Oxford's fall term, Obbink was relieved of his teaching duties.

I traveled to Oxford later that week and rang the doorbell at a comfortable-looking but hardly lavish house with a small swimming pool at the end of a leafy lane. When Obbink opened the door, he was wearing black jeans, slip-on leather shoes, and a tan shirt with stylized military epaulets.

I said I was there because I wanted to hear his side of the story.

"I'd like to tell it," he said, with an almost preternatural calm, "but I'm under a duty not to speak about the matter while it's under investigation" by Oxford.

In April, I sent Obbink and his attorney a detailed list of questions. His attorney responded with three minor clarifications, but said that Obbink was otherwise unable to comment because he owed "confidentiality to Oxford during its ongoing internal process."

IF OBBINK'S RELATIONSHIP with the Greens had a fatal flaw, it was that he needed it to stay secret, whereas the Greens wanted to shout it to the world. "By far and away, Dirk is the most strategic friend and supporter of all that we are doing," Carroll wrote to Steve Green in a June 2011 email.

In negotiations with Hobby Lobby for the sale of the four "first-century" fragments, Obbink had demanded a set of highly irregular contract clauses: There was to be no public announcement of the acquisition; Obbink could never be named as the seller; and the fragments would stay in his office at Oxford for four years—after which there would be what he called "a kind of 'shared custody' with 'visitation rights.'"

In hindsight, Pattengale allowed, the whole arrangement "was kind of far-fetched." But at the time, all he could think of was how much he wanted Hobby Lobby to own a gospel fragment from so close to Jesus's day. He emailed his superiors, pressing them to meet Obbink's demands; they eventually did.

When I met Jeff Fish on the Baylor campus last fall, he wore a look of anguish as he talked about a man he'd once venerated. What hurt most was a sense that Obbink had tried to play him for a patsy—assuring him of Carroll's bona fides, and encouraging him to publish papyri the EES would later claim as stolen.

"I was used," Fish said.

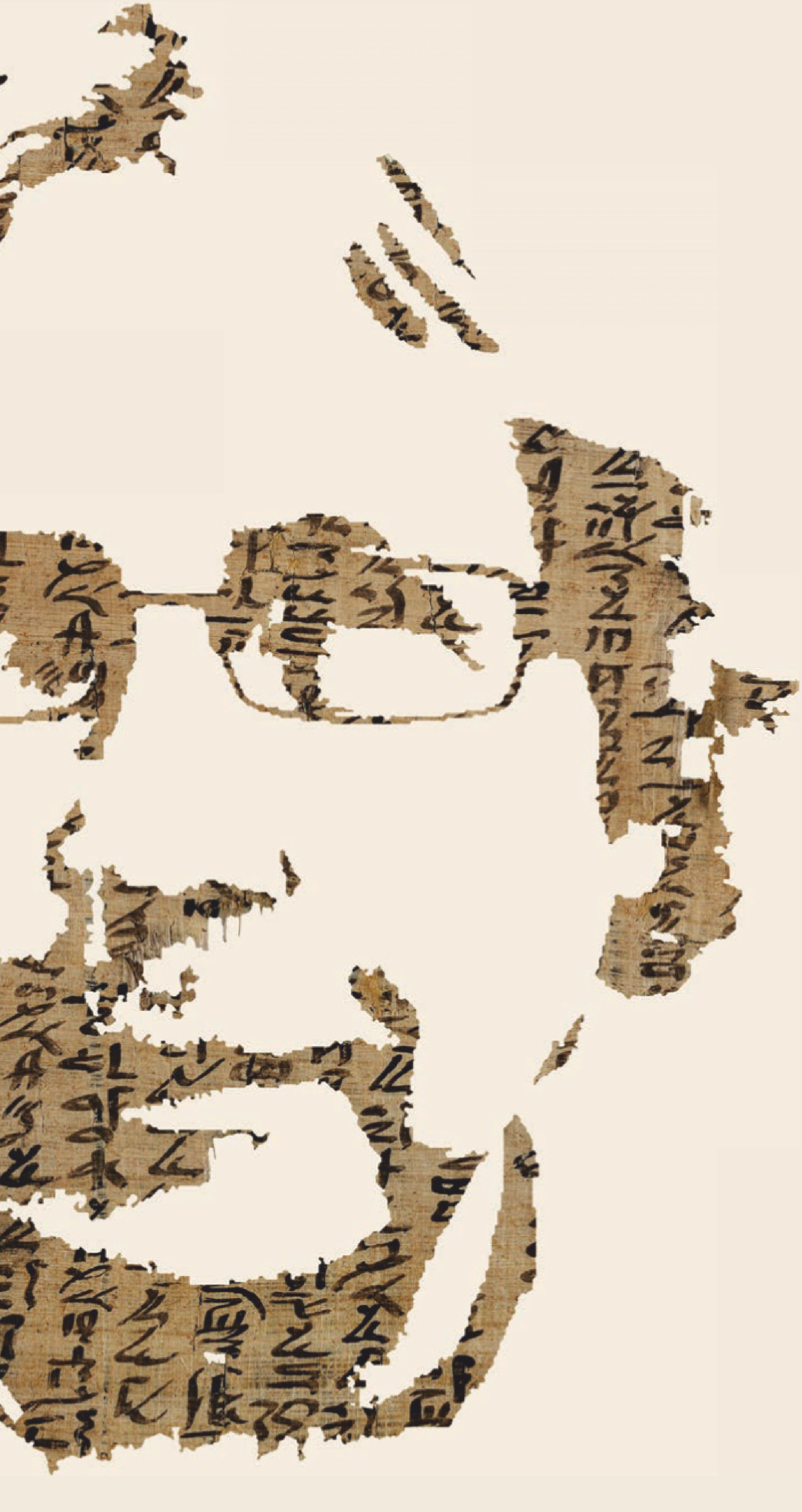
Baylor, which had brought Obbink to campus a few times to give lectures and short seminars, had been on the cusp of offering him a full-time, tenure-track job in 2018 when Fish intervened. "It would be a terrible mistake," Fish warned the classics chairman. Obbink never got the offer.

His payments to Lupfer, the renovator of his Texas castle, soon fell into arrears. In February 2019, he sold the property to Chip and Joanna Gaines, the Waco couple behind the HGTV series *Fixer Upper*. Factoring in the $200,000 he had spent on renovations, Obbink lost roughly $100,000 on the sale, according to Lupfer.

ON MARCH 26, Steve Green announced that he was giving 5,000 of his papyri to Egypt. It was an admission that virtually every papyrus in his collection lacked sufficient evidence of not having been stolen, looted, or acquired by other improper means. For the same reasons, he said, he was repatriating 6,500 clay relics to Iraq—on top of the 3,500 Iraqi antiquities Hobby Lobby had surrendered to settle a 2017 federal smuggling case.

Green and his museum have sought to portray themselves as chastened by their early stumbles and determined to make amends—both by coming clean about their failures and by making institutional changes. "I trusted the wrong people to guide me," Green said, "and unwittingly dealt with unscrupulous dealers in those early years."

Scholars have praised the latest reforms. But Green's efforts to deflect blame have rung hollow in some circles.



In 2010, early in his collecting blitz, Green had attended a presentation that Hobby Lobby commissioned from Patty Gerstenblith, a DePaul University professor who is one of the world's foremost experts on cultural property law. "I warned him," Gerstenblith told me, "and he proceeded anyway." With hundreds of millions of dollars of spending power, Green had all the leverage to ask hard questions about provenance—and to order investigations—before handing his money over to dealers. But he never did.

In the Obbink case, Green and his representatives have cast themselves as the unsuspecting dupes of a mastermind. Green told me he'd failed to see the conflict in Obbink's dual roles as adviser and seller because of his "stellar reputation and standing in the scholarly community." He added, "I would never intentionally buy anything forged or stolen."

Green has returned the stolen Oxyrhynchus fragments to Oxford, and in 2018, he told me, Hobby Lobby asked Obbink to refund the money it had paid him for the four "first-century" gospel fragments.

"Professor Obbink provided assurances many times that he would pay us back, and asked for time, which we patiently gave him," Green told me. He said Obbink reimbursed $10,000 last summer but stopped communicating after news of the alleged thefts broke last fall.

Until Oxford, the EES, or the police reveal more, many questions will remain unanswered. But in the eyes of some devout critics, the last chapter of this saga will be written by a higher authority. "Believers in the truth of the Bible cannot act like pirates," Peter Costello wrote last year in *The Irish Catholic*, Ireland's largest religious newspaper. "If they wish to help establish the truth they must do it through legal channels … God's truth deserves nothing less." *A*

Ariel Sabar, a winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award, is the author of Veritas: A Harvard Professor, a Con Man and the Gospel of Jesus's Wife, *which will be published by Doubleday in August.*

ILLUSTRATION BY GUILLEM CASASUS

Culture & Critics

APPLE TV+

ILLUSTRATION BY PAUL SPELLA

So Sad, Can't Stop Laughing

TV sadcoms probe life's bleak moments more pointedly than many dramas do.

By Sophie Gilbert

The hallmark of all the superlative TV comedies of the past few years has been what happens in the moments when they're not funny at all. The BBC import *Fleabag*, for all its swaggering raunch and dotty hijinks, turns out to be a surprisingly profound portrait of grief and catharsis. HBO's *Succession* exposes the tragic emotional vacuity lurking beneath corporate avarice run amok. On the same network, in *Barry*, Bill Hader plays a hit man with a heart who, like Ferdinand the bull, would rather sit and smell the metaphorical flowers than kill people, but his internal wiring and past allegiances keep getting in the way.

The moments between joy and despair are the moments that feel the most transcendently human.

While this broad category of TV tragicomedy has become a thriving staple (Netflix's *BoJack Horseman* is an outstandingly surreal example), the subgenre of it now known as the sadcom—series that make you laugh not *through* pain but at it—is making its own mark. Here, subjects that in the standard sitcom realm are relegated to Very Special Episodes or deemed far too calamitous for the relentless cheer of *Friends* or *Modern Family* take pride of place: nervous breakdowns, addiction, the astonishing human capacity for self-hatred. The latest addition to a notably British lineup (which includes not just *Fleabag* but Hulu's *This Way Up* and *Catastrophe* on Amazon) is *Trying* on Apple TV+. The eight-episode series is about a young married couple living in a picture-perfect pastel rowhouse in London's Camden Town, their sweet, goofy life and palpable mutual affection shadowed by an ongoing failure to get pregnant.

Trying begins absurdly: Nikki (Esther Smith) and Jason (Rafe Spall) are heading home from a night out when Nikki suddenly realizes she's just missed her ovulation window. "I'm less fertile now, I can totally feel it," she wails. On the top level of a double-decker bus, she comes up with a plan: She and Jason can seize the moment, because the only other passenger is an elderly woman who appears to be sleeping. Jason, less than eager, complains that she's ruining the mood. Finally, they finish; the woman, it turns out, was awake all along, and is glaring at them. Nikki, laughing, doesn't care. "I swear, I think that was it," she tells Jason, dewy-eyed and poignantly hopeful. "That was the baby." The next scene jumps forward in time to a doctor's office, as the couple are told they have no viable embryos left for in vitro fertilization and only a minimal chance of conceiving with further cycles using Nikki's eggs.

"So I can't have a baby?" Nikki asks, devastated.

The doctor pauses, tries to think of the right response, fails, winces. "Let me get you another leaflet," she says.

I laughed, despite myself, despite the pathos of the scene, despite Nikki's disconsolate face and how much I truly ached for her. It was a good joke. And, in that situation, what are you really supposed to say? How can you comfort someone when the thing she wants most in the world is the thing she can't manage to achieve? ("How," Nikki says to Jason later, sitting on a park bench in the sunshine, "can I miss something I've never had?") As a doctor, or an artist, or a TV writer, how can you try to ease the countless strains and shocks and degradations of being alive? Reason can't make sense of the slings and arrows of outrageous misfortune, but humor—sometimes—can soften the blows.

I love sadcoms because the moments they skewer, in between joy and despair, are the moments that feel the most transcendently human. Neither drama nor comedy alone is sufficient for capturing what it feels like to shuffle on day by day through routine tasks, minor victories, and heartaches; through glorious breakthroughs and unthinkable plagues. When I look at social media now, my feed is invariably a disorienting mix of death statistics and sickbed bulletins and funny dads dancing, the pain and the comfort all commingling in one intimately jarring reality. The sadcom, at its best, replicates this. The café owner known only as Fleabag attends a family dinner at which a wedding is discussed, alcoholism is confronted, and pregnancies are miscarried—all in the space of a few discombobulating minutes. In the charmingly hopeful *This Way Up*, created by the comedian Aisling Bea, Aine (Bea), an English-language teacher recovering from "a teeny little nervous breakdown," compulsively shoplifts a bottled smoothie before dutifully recycling the container, as if to try to restore some karmic balance to her anxious soul.

On *Trying*, fertility is less a subject than a theme, which allows the show to treat it with irreverence, and sometimes even ignore it altogether. In other genres, as with Tamara Jenkins's Netflix movie, *Private Life*, or Duncan Macmillan's hit play *Lungs*, the weight of wanting—and failing—to reproduce often comes with disclaimers: soliloquies on the lamentable state of the world, the ravages of climate change, the burden of one more tiny consumer on an already drastically overstretched ecosystem. *Trying*, at least early on, dispatches with the hand-wringing. Nikki and Jason simply want a baby because they love each other and they have more love to give. They're also, like many 30-somethings, starting to wonder what life really means without the rote markers of adult progress. "If we can't have one of our own and we don't wanna adopt, then what are we gonna do with the rest of our lives?" Jason asks. "I dunno," Nikki replies. "Join a sodding book club?" A scene or two later, Nikki is shown earnestly and dutifully poring over *The Brothers Karamazov*.

The not-so-secret secret of *Trying* is that the title doesn't just refer to Jason and Nikki's quest to become parents. Almost all of the characters in the series seem to be doing their humble best to figure it out, whether *it* means getting over a breakup, raising children, confronting past mistakes, or just forging ahead in pursuit of a meaningful life. "We should donate to a charity," Nikki says, as Jason fills out the adoption application form they decide to submit. "Then we can say we donate to charity." Jason points out that they'll be essentially catfishing social services. "It's fine!" Nikki counters. "As long as we're these people by the time they meet us, it's all good." In *Fleabag*, the main character's self-betterment rituals include signing up with a trainer, not giving in to the temptation of casual sex with idiotic hookups, and actually working at work. "Putting pine nuts on your salad doesn't make you a grown-up," Fleabag's sister, Claire (Sian Clifford), says snootily. "Fucking does," Fleabag asides to the viewers at home.

At its core, the sadcom refuses to deny, or be undone by, a bleak truth: Life can be hopelessly bewildering, and complicated, and compromising, and intermittently crushing. While many contemporary TV dramas tend to root themselves in versions of the past (*Stranger Things*, *Peaky Blinders*) or the future (*Westworld*, *Devs*) to tell freighted stories, the sadcom is set flatly in the here and now. And without being steeped in dour self-seriousness, its moments of pathos and insight ring truer. Like Shakespeare's fools and rustic clowns before them, its characters use jokes slyly, to expound with unexpected acuity on the state of the world around them. Their Millennial angst is darkly familiar. Their struggles can profoundly resonate. And their victories mean all the more for it. "I do want to get better. *Live*. It's hard, man," *This Way Up*'s Aine says at the end of the six-part series. "The dailiness of it can be sort of relentless. But all we can do is give it a go." *A*

Sophie Gilbert is a staff writer at The Atlantic.

Tree Beyond Your Window

By Michael Collier

One day you look up
and all that's left of leaves
is a twisted trunk, thick at the base,

an obelisk, split at the top
like an ungulate's hoof, a shaft
riddled with holes, hopeful places

for birds to make their fastidious nests.
And if you look closer, you'll see a tortoise,
head as big as a howitzer shell

and two legs, trying calmly
to swim out from the leathery bark
of which it's made.

It wants to know, like an accuser
in a dream, what have you done
with your life, and raising its rough,

amphibious hands, holding them out,
implores you to pull its ancient
body from the tree.

Michael Collier's most recent collection is My Bishop and Other Poems *(2018).*

BOOKS

The Special Child

In his unsettling trilogy about a possibly divine boy, J. M. Coetzee asks how we recognize the truth when it enters the world.

By William Deresiewicz

As he passed his 70th birthday, J. M. Coetzee—South African–born Nobel laureate, two-time winner of the Booker Prize, among the greatest living writers in the English language—embarked on a highly atypical series of works. His previous 14 novels, all shorter than 300 pages, possessed a spare, compressed intensity of language and design. Now he has completed a trilogy—*The Childhood of Jesus*, *The Schooldays of Jesus*, and finally *The Death of Jesus*—that sprawls to more than 750. It is ruminative, meandering, and open-ended. Its prose is flat; its mood is often slack. It is strange, enigmatic, unsettling. And oddest of all, it is not about Jesus.

It is about a boy who is known only as Davíd. Davíd, who both is and isn't Jesus, lives with Simón and Inés, who both are

ILLUSTRATION BY KAROLIS STRAUTNIEKAS

and aren't his parents, in a world that both is and isn't our own. And Davíd both is and isn't his name. It is the name that was assigned to him when he and Simón arrived in the country, or sphere, where the action takes place. Arrived from where? They themselves do not appear to know. Another country? Another life? Another plane? They had traveled across the sea, a process, we learn, that cleansed them of memories. They had passed a few weeks in a camp, where they'd begun to learn the local language, then been processed through a relocation center. Are they refugees? Immigrants? Souls transported to a kind of blandly social-democratic afterlife? The place is peaceful, if dull; their needs are met, if meagerly. Or is it only another life—lust and pain and death and even evil, it transpires, have not been banished—one, perhaps, in an endless succession of lives?

And who is Simón to Davíd? The story Simón tells—tells himself as much as anyone (it is itself a memory, or perhaps something less than a memory: a reconstruction, even a wishful fabrication)—is that he had seen Davíd alone aboard the ship. In a pouch around his neck, the boy had carried a letter to his mother (to his mother? from his mother?), but the letter had gone missing, at which point Simón had stepped in. He would help him find her, he vowed, though Davíd could not tell him her name or what she looked like. One day, on a walk, a few months into their new existence, Simón is convinced that he sees her. Don't you recognize her? he asks the boy. Davíd shakes his head, but Simón is undeterred. He accosts the woman; she is young, haughty, wealthy. Will you be his mother? he asks. Adopt him? she responds. "Not adopt," he says. "Be his mother, his full mother."

Generational conflict takes the form of children's struggle to be understood by parents—to be understood as different from them.

This is Inés. She recoils, retreats, relents. The three become a family, and for the rest of its first installment, as well as for most of its second, the trilogy is, as much as anything, the story of a family—an unusual family but in many ways a familiar, modern one. The parents do not get along. Inés is cold; Simón is a well-meaning plodder; they only stay together for the kid. Inés is convinced that the boy is exceptional. Davíd will soon be 6, and his parents struggle over schooling. "Inés says I don't have to go to school," Davíd informs Simón. "She says I am her treasure. She says … I won't get individual attention at school."

The homeschooling project does not go well—Davíd refuses to learn to read or write, except in a private language of his own invention, and with math he'll have nothing to do—but when his parents place him in a public school, that does not go any better. Davíd is not "adjusting" well, they're told. He is disruptive, inattentive; he disobeys the teacher. The parents are ordered to see a psychologist. Their child lacks "a real parental presence," she announces. She suspects that he might be dyslexic. "I would say that what is special about Davíd is that he feels himself to be special."

Like any good allegory—any good allegorical novel, at least—the trilogy invites us to read it on multiple levels. On one, Davíd is not the messiah but simply an exceptionally gifted child, the kind of kid with whom the world in general, and the education system in particular, does not know how to deal. He *can* read and write, we discover—he's taught himself. He just doesn't want to read the sort of stories that he's expected to read in school ("Juan and María go to the sea … Juan and María are excited") or write the sort he's expected to write ("Stories about vacations. About what people do during vacations"). He asks incessant, inconvenient questions, the kind the grown-ups can't or would rather not answer ("Who is God?" "What are breasts for?"). His relationship with numbers can be understood as personal, even mystical. They are not, for him, abstractions to be added and subtracted, but unique and individualized entities. When his teacher asks him for the sum of five and three, he closes his eyes, "as if listening for a far-off word to be spoken." At last he says, "This time … this time … it is … eight."

His parents, however supportive and loving, are not more comprehending than his teacher is. And Davíd resents them for it. They do not "recognize" him, he insists: meaning, as we'd say today, they do not "get" him, do not see him for who he is. Davíd is not my real name, he interjects when Simón and Inés introduce him, and these are not my real parents. So what is, and who are? He doesn't know himself. At many moments, Davíd's is the story not only of every unusual child, every adopted child, but of every child, full stop: every child who daydreams of being an orphan, of being a prince in disguise, who believes his real parents will arrive one day to rescue him, who wants to know who he is and where he is from and where he is meant to belong.

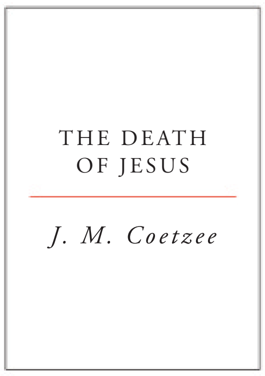
THE TRILOGY thus embodies two of Coetzee's persistent themes: generational conflict and the problem of "recognition." The two are intertwined. Generational conflict in his novels takes the form of children's struggle, not to free themselves from parents but to be understood by them—to be understood as different from them. That is Lucy's struggle with her father, David Lurie, in *Disgrace* (1999), as she chooses to stay on the farmstead where she has been raped. In *The Master of Petersburg* (1994), a Dostoyevskian novel about Dostoyevsky, it is Pavel's struggle with his stepfather, the writer himself. But the story is invariably told from the parent's perspective—in the trilogy, from the perspective of Simón. Which means it takes the form of a baffled, anguished, desperate drive, not to be understood, but to understand: to leap the gulf from self to other, to penetrate the secrets of another soul.

And that is Coetzee's greatest theme of all, the thread that runs throughout his work, that structures his work. We also find that drive directed in his novels toward the racial other: toward the blinded "barbarian" girl in *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980); toward the black and all-but-mute protagonist in *Life and Times of Michael K* (1983); toward Friday in *Foe* (1986), Coetzee's rewriting of *Robinson Crusoe*, who has had his tongue cut out—figures who cannot speak or will not speak or can't be heard. In *Elizabeth Costello* (2003), in a pair of bravura passages, we find it directed toward figures who aren't even human: animals in captivity and the gods on high. Elizabeth Costello is a writer; she is Coetzee's alter ego as a writer. The problem of understanding, in his conception—the problem of "recognition"—is the writer's essential predicament: how to speak for others; how to make the other speak.

Davíd is luckier than Pavel or Lucy. In the trilogy's second installment, he finds adults who get him. He enrolls in an academy of music and dance that is run by a couple, Juan Arroyo and Ana Magdalena, whose sensibility speaks to his own. The numbers are music, they teach. The numbers are stars. We play and dance—the dance of Two, the more intricate dance of Three, the still more intricate dance of Five—to summon them down from the heavens. Rather than individuals being regarded as numbers, as is the practice of states and bureaucracies (a census is conducted during *The Schooldays of Jesus*), numbers are regarded as individuals, unique and sacred beings. The world is re-enchanted; instrumental reason is rejected; the universe is apprehended in a way both new and ancient.

But despite this promising development, the academy is also where the trilogy runs headlong, it appears, into *The Brothers Karamazov*—or at least into the brothers Karamazov—derailing its hopeful trajectory. There is an Alyosha, a young assistant and, like his counterpart in Dostoyevsky, a gentle and sensitive soul. There is a Dmitri, a kind of hanger-on (he's a guard at the nearby museum) and, as in the earlier novel, a brutal sensualist and sentimentalist. There is no Ivan, but there is, as we saw, a Juan, the Spanish equivalent, a luftmensch like his predecessor.

In the middle of the novel—at the center of the trilogy—Dmitri commits an unspeakable, intimate murder. He is remanded to a mental institution: This is a society that believes in psychiatry, not sin. Some weeks later, as the volume culminates, the academy puts on a lecture-demonstration. Davíd dances Seven, a vision of grace. "As if the earth has lost its downward power," Simón thinks, "the boy seems to shed all bodily weight, to become pure light." From the back of the theater, Dmitri, escaped, bursts in. "Forgive me," he cries. And here Davíd displays his superhuman (if not exactly Christlike) moral gifts. No forgiveness, he decrees: "You must bring her back." The judgment represents a kind of spiritual riddle—or, if you will, a parable.


THE DEATH
OF JESUS

J. M. Coetzee

VIKING

It is no spoiler to reveal that *The Death of Jesus* narrates Davíd's demise. Here, at last, the trilogy rises to stretches of power and beauty. As affecting as Davíd's decline is—his classmates, like disciples, gather around his hospital bed to be enchanted by his tales—its aftermath is even more so. A comet has traversed the sky, and those who witnessed it are left to seek its meaning and dispute its legacy. Legends take shape; a miracle is reported; a mystery is mooted; competing cults are born. Coetzee is conducting a thought experiment. What does it look like when the truth arrives on Earth in the frail vessel of a human being? How can we recognize it? What do we grasp of it? In what ways does it change the world?

And do we even believe that that is what has taken place? His titles notwithstanding, Coetzee offers no definitive proof that the trilogy does indeed narrate a visitation from the divine. Maybe the boy is just exceptional. (Maybe those are the same thing.) As important here as is *The Brothers Karamazov*, the chief presiding presence is *Don Quixote*. Early on, Simón obtains a copy for Davíd, in a children's illustrated version, and the book becomes a point of reference, implicit and explicit, for the rest of the trilogy. Simón plays Sancho Panza, the stolid but faintly ridiculous man of common sense, to Davíd's Don Quixote, the florid and passionate fabulist—except, that is, when the roles are reversed, just like in the original. (There can be no more quixotic a moment than when Simón lays eyes on Inés and decides that she must be Davíd's mother.)

Coetzee is asking Cervantes's questions as well. Is truth a function of perspective? Are reason and the senses the only valid ways of knowing? What is real—or more to the point, is there more than one way for a thing to be real? Do the products of the imagination—beliefs that we need to believe, memories that we construct, legends that we tell of people after they have gone, novels like *Don Quixote*—possess their own reality, especially given that they clearly have the power to affect the world? When the truth arrives on Earth, Coetzee suggests, it takes the form of a question.

William Deresiewicz is the author of The Death of the Artist: How Creators Are Struggling to Survive in the Age of Billionaires and Big Tech, *to be published in July.*

BOOKS

Why Birds Do What They Do

The more humans understand about their behavior, the more inaccessible their world seems.

By Jenny Odell

Bushtits—almost impossibly tiny gray birds that live in flocks across the western United States—are not hard to spot in the Bay Area. I usually become aware of them by noticing a chorus of peeping in part of an oak tree that seems to be jiggling. Their nests, though, are well hidden, and they're different from what most people would expect. Made out of spiderwebs, fur, lichen, and plant material, they hang down from a couple of branches like a strange-looking sock with a side entrance near the top. A month or so ago, when my friend Joe showed me the nest he'd found, we watched the birds ferrying bits of fuzz and what we speculated were oak flowers, adding them thoughtfully to the growing blob.

Bushtits were some of the first birds I learned to identify when I started bird-watching, in 2016, armed with what seems to be the standard guide in these parts. *Sibley Birds West* features two species to a page with a brief description, different molts, and subspecies—all written and illustrated by David Allen Sibley, widely considered the successor to Roger Tory Peterson, who invented the modern field guide. But in the years since, I've become aware of how much is left to learn about the birds I thought I knew. To observe birds not just as instances but as actors is bird-watching *in time*, whether I'm observing moment-to-moment decisions or changes across the seasons. As if anticipating my curiosity, Sibley has now produced a different kind of book, *What It's Like to Be a Bird*, whose cover promises it will explain "what birds are doing, and why."

I had been reading the book when Joe pointed out the nest, and soon I started seeing nests everywhere—dark, enigmatic shapes hidden in the leaves, like tiny versions of the alien ship from *Arrival*. Luckily for me, a full page in Sibley's new book shows the step-by-step construction of the bushtit nest, starting with a skeleton of spiderweb stretched across branches, which is then gradually filled in and deepened. One day in a parklet near my house, I strained to see two bushtits on step one of the building process, the faintest spiderweb ring connecting two twigs. I got excited. The birds were *doing something*! Meanwhile, a ground squirrel crashed clumsily through the tree, and when it got too close to their fragile creation, the bushtits changed from their usual peeping to an alarm call.

Unexpectedly caught up in this battle for existence in a small oak tree, I found myself wanting to join in the alarm and shoo the squirrel away. Feeling the bushtits' frustration (or so it seemed) made me think of the surprisingly tender preface to Sibley's book, in which he writes that instinct is more than merely programmatic: Birds must be motivated by something like feelings. "I realize this is enormously anthropomorphic," he notes, but nevertheless, "maybe

ILLUSTRATION BY SACRÉE FRANGINE

the feeling an oriole has when looking at its finished nest is similar to the feeling human parents get when we look at a newly painted and decorated nursery. Maybe the chickadee 'sleeps well' after a good day of gathering and storing food for the winter."

The anthropomorphizing caveat points toward the mental, even emotional, reach that is always happening when we try to imagine "what birds are doing, and why." In his 1974 essay "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?," the philosopher Thomas Nagel famously argued that answering this question is impossible because the differences between us are just too great:

> Even if I could by gradual degrees be transformed into a bat, nothing in my present constitution enables me to imagine what the experiences of such a future stage of myself thus metamorphosed would be like. The best evidence would come from the experiences of bats, if we only knew what they were like.

Sibley is undaunted. Describing what scientists have discovered about the vision of a snipe, he asks us to "imagine being able to see the entire sky and horizon, and some detail along most of the horizon, without turning your head." Birds also process images more than twice as fast as humans do; Sibley speculates that our movies would look like slideshows to them. To explain the way that warblers and other birds use the magnetic field to navigate, he has to portray an entire sense that humans don't have, using "a totally hypothetical artist's rendering of what the bird might see in the sky": a domed band of polarized light, crossed with another oriented with the magnetic field.

IN ALL THIS STRUGGLING to imagine, I encounter a certain irony: The more I know about birds, the more inaccessible their perceptual world seems to me. From Jennifer Ackerman's *The Bird Way: A New Look at How Birds Talk, Work, Play, Parent, and Think*, I learned that birds such as the vinous-throated parrotbill and the black Jacobin hummingbird make sounds beyond our range of hearing, while the mating displays of male black manakins feature a "high-speed somersault" so fast that humans can see it only in slowed-down video. Birds see colors that we never will, and distinguish among colors that look the same to us. Writing about how they interpret a wall of foliage as "a detailed three-dimensional world of highly contrasting individual leaves," Ackerman laments that she has tried to see what birds see, but humans just can't differentiate among the greens.

Learning more also means having more questions. Both books include recent research that illuminates new behavior, whose mechanics and purpose remain hypothetical or totally unknown. Ackerman writes that veeries, a type of North American thrush, can anticipate hurricanes months in advance, adjusting their nesting and migration schedules accordingly—but the way they do it is a "deep mystery."

Veeries, a type of North American thrush, can anticipate hurricanes months in advance, adjusting their nesting and migration schedules accordingly.

One unforgettable example comes from the greater ani, a South American species of cuckoo. As Ackerman explains, greater anis form genetically unrelated co-parenting groups that stay together for a decade or more; choosing a nest site and building the nest are cooperative efforts. The females all lay eggs at the same time and are incapable of recognizing any particular egg as their own. Throughout the day, the birds will gather into what Christina Riehl, a Princeton ecology and evolutionary-biology professor, calls "a giant football huddle," bringing their beaks close together and emitting a strange gurgling sound for 10 minutes or more. Somehow the gurgling is part of the communication needed to make complicated group decisions, but Riehl tells Ackerman that she is unsure of the specifics. "How do individual birds 'vote' in these collective forums?" she asks. "How do they overcome disagreements and conflicting opinions?"

On YouTube, I was able to track down only one video of this gurgling, which was taken by Priscilla Diniz in Manaus, Brazil. It's called "Crotophaga major / Anu-coroca / Greater Ani," and I have probably watched it 50 times now. Three anis sit in a tree, their heads close together, making a sound that a viewer might attribute to some kind of background noise until they all stop, rearrange themselves, and begin again. As they make the sound, their bodies vibrate slightly, like an old car that's just been started up. They inch closer together, cocking their heads slightly, seeming (from my anthropomorphic view) to be listening attentively to one another. At some point a fourth ani arrives and joins in the vibrating and gurgling. Every time I watch this video, I can barely believe that what I'm seeing exists on Earth.

But this strangeness exists even in our backyards. My imagination is stretched every morning by the neighborhood crows that I befriended on my street in 2016, after learning in Ackerman's previous book, *The Genius of Birds*, that they recognize human faces. I've had four years to observe the behavior of one crow family. I've seen them groom one another, forage in the neighbor's roof gutter, peck curiously at mushrooms, wipe their beaks on the power line, yawn, scold a hawk or cat (with different sounds for each), do barrel rolls when it's windy, and sometimes follow me down the block, landing on various branches near my head. Lately they seem to enjoy my hiding a peanut for them under a pile of driftwood and pine cones, and they once moved a small rock from one side of my balcony to the other. Why they did this is … a deep mystery. The more I observe them, the less of a grasp I feel I have on them. Instead, they look more and more like willful individuals.

THE CROWS also remind me that while birds and humans may see different worlds, we inhabit the same one, our alien universes stitched together at the point of contact, continually influencing each other. One day, overjoyed to find a bushtit nest down the street from my house, I realized that a scrub jay was watching me. Scrub jays, part of the same family as crows, are known to possess something like theory of mind, the ability to imagine what another animal is thinking. When burying a snack, if a scrub jay sees another jay watching, it will pretend to finish burying it, then come back and rebury it later. Jays also eat bushtit eggs. Noticing the scrub jay, I scurried away, thinking it might have used my behavior (stopping and staring) to locate the nest.

Birds respond to human behavior in the long term, too. Ackerman writes that zebra finches, facing a warming climate, have a way of communicating an instruction to their unhatched young to hatch smaller so that they lose heat more easily. Sibley notes that scrub jays are nesting five to 12 days earlier than they did 100 years ago, probably to align with plant and insect cycles affected by climate change. Some birds in urban areas have ramped up nighttime singing in response to increased daytime noise, and birds living in loud places have shifted the pitch of their songs higher in order to be heard. Of course, behavioral flexibility can go only so far. In September 2019, *Science* published findings that North America had lost close to a third of its birds in the past 50 years. One of birds' broadest responses to human behavior, it turns out, has been to vanish.

There's a large cemetery not far from where I live. For now, thanks to the abundance of trees and ponds, this area of rolling hills hosts an amazing variety of birds. Next to one of the ponds is a coast live oak tree and a grassy ledge where I like to sit and lie back. From there, I can look into the branches of the oak, waiting for the arrival of others. I have seen oak titmice, chickadees, house finches, goldfinches, white-breasted nuthatches, brown creepers, yellow-rumped warblers, Townsend's warblers, western bluebirds, ruby-crowned kinglets, black phoebes, Bewick's wrens, white-crowned sparrows, golden-crowned sparrows, California towhees, scrub jays, Steller's jays, Cooper's hawks, ravens, acorn woodpeckers, and, yes, bushtits.

When I was once telling a friend that this was my favorite way of bird-watching, I said something about how "it's as if I'm not there at all." We laughed ruefully at how this sounded: me on the ground in the cemetery, not moving, surrounded by graves. Besides being a genuinely good way to see birds, it was also a form of self-erasure—as though only by imagining myself to have exited the living world could I absolve myself of being human, the species responsible for the demise of birds and so much life on Earth. The wish to disappear was a wish for bird-watching without the watching: just birds.

WHAT IT'S LIKE
TO BE A BIRD:
FROM FLYING
TO NESTING,
EATING TO
SINGING—WHAT
BIRDS ARE
DOING, AND WHY

David Allen Sibley

KNOPF

THE BIRD WAY:
A NEW LOOK
AT HOW BIRDS
TALK, WORK,
PLAY, PARENT,
AND THINK

Jennifer Ackerman

PENGUIN PRESS

Ackerman mentions an "only partly tongue-in-cheek" speculation offered by Mathias Osvath, a cognitive-science researcher who works frequently with corvids. These birds have learned to use human civilization for food and shelter (for example, memorizing the schedule of garbage trucks), and Osvath says that if we were to disappear, the selective pressure might push them to become superintelligent, "the next big thinkers." There's a calm comfort in imagining a crow society devoid of humans. But I can't let myself rest there. I must get up from my spot in the cemetery and return to the present, where the experiences of birds and humans are entangled, where our behavior matters.

I can imagine more people reading about bird behavior and starting to see birds as intentional actors bearing rights, rather than decorative or entertaining automatons. And if I really try, I can stretch my imagination even further. In *Re-enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons*, Silvia Federici writes about refusing a political and economic "state of irresponsibility" in which "the production of our life inevitably becomes a production of death for others." Trying honestly to envision a world in which there are still birds left for us to watch means thinking about how bird-watching can never be an idle or apolitical hobby, insofar as I'm watching the lives of others on this imperiled planet where I also live.

At times, I want to give up, dissolve into the cemetery grass. But the birds are always there, drawing me out and upward. Different though we may be, I think I do know one part of animal experience firsthand: this curious "life-y-ness" of life, which wants to go on, even to proliferate. I watch the crows gathering big beakfuls of grass from a dry patch across the street to line a nest for their young. I find a perfect cup-shaped hummingbird nest in a bottlebrush tree, and watch a discerning raven transporting certain sticks (but not others) to the top of a redwood. Joe texts to say that the bushtit nest has become a perfect L shape and that its two architects have settled down inside it. With every new generation of birds, my feeling of responsibility deepens. They remind me of what I'm doing, and why.

Jenny Odell, an artist and a writer based in Oakland, California, is the author of How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy.

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ESSAYS

I.

WHAT TAKES OUR BREATH AWAY

An undertaker reflects on the one thing death can't steal: our stories.

By Thomas Lynch

FIRST SOLEMN HIGH MASS OF
REV. THOMAS P. LYNCH.
ST. JOHN'S CHURCH, JACKSON, MICH. JUNE 10 1934.
FEDOR FOTO

My father's uncle, Thomas Patrick Lynch, got the Spanish flu. He was 12 years old, the youngest son of Irish immigrants who'd escaped the perennial potato blights, political mischief, and poverty of County Clare in the late 19th century. They'd found their way to Jackson, Michigan, where what would eventually be heralded as the "largest walled prison in the world" was a constant work in progress through the Gilded Age, providing plenty of work for Irish laborers. Thomas's father, my great-grandfather, worked his way up from grunt work to janitor to uniformed guard.

Thomas, for whom I'd later be named, survived the scourge, and his mother proclaimed that God had spared him for a "special calling." Thus, though he remained wheezy and croupy into his young adulthood, he entered the seminary and became a priest of the Holy Roman, Irish-American, Catholic Church in 1934.

The panoramic photo of his first "solemn high" Mass that year, taken outside St. John's Church in Jackson, down Cooper Street from the prison, remains a fixture in our family households in Michigan and in Moveen, on the coast of County Clare, whence his people came. Vocations follow famines, the Irish bromide holds; no less pandemics, truth be told.

It was a watershed moment in our family history.

PHOTOGRAPHS HOLD their moments in time, free of the future or the past, and through the generations, time brings these moments into truer focus. Among the housebound multitudes, I imagine that many like me—alone on a lake with a dog—fill some of their quarantined hours rummaging through old photographs and the stories they tell.

The child seated in the center of the photograph of that day is my father, Edward Lynch Jr., in knickers, ankle socks, and saddle shoes. He is 10 years old and seated beside his parents. In two years, he'll meet my mother in the fifth grade at St. Francis de Sales, where he'll play right tackle on the football team. After graduating in '42, he'll enlist in the Marines and end up in combat in the South Pacific and return to marry Rosemary O'Hara, with whom he'll raise me and my eight siblings. In the photo he is poised to become the man he'd be, the founder of our family firm of undertakers in Southeast Michigan.

Two days after this photo is taken, the freshly minted priest will be sent by his bishop in Detroit to work for the bishop in New Mexico, in hopes that the high, dry air of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains will extend the useful ministry of the sickly young survivor of that horrible flu. He is stationed at the parish of Nuestra Senora de Guadalupe in Taos, and rides the circuits between San Geronimo in Taos Pueblo and the Spanish American churches that the paintings of Georgia O'Keeffe will make famous. He dispenses baptisms, forgiveness, Communion, and extreme unction to the faithful. He teaches the Native American boys to play baseball. He marries and buries, christens and catechizes, as curates do.

Two years and two months later, he dies of influenza and pneumonia in Santa Fe. The angel of death that passed over him as a boy returns to take him as a man. The bishop has his body prepared and boxed for shipment home by train as freight marked C.O.D. The corpse is collected from the depot by agents of the Catholic mortuary in Jackson.

Thus it is to the Desnoyer Funeral Home that my grandfather goes to make arrangements for his brother's burial. For reasons unknown to anyone now, he takes his 12-year-old son along. While my grandfather and Mr. Desnoyer discuss boxes, flowers, and fees, my father wanders through the funeral home until he comes to a room at the back of the house where, looking through a door slightly ajar, he espies white-shirted men in black trousers and striped gray ties, dressing the body in liturgical vestments on a long porcelain table. Then, wordlessly, as if by grim routine, they gather up the dead man's body in their arms and sidestep their slow way toward a casket. They lower him into a sort of repose. They place his biretta in the corner and pin a crucifix in the middle of the open lid, adjust the green chasuble, string a rosary around his anointed hands, then turn to see the boy in the doorway.

My father will ever after trace his resolve to become an undertaker to this moment in the first week of August in 1936.

"Why?" we'd always ask him when he'd retell his story. "Why didn't you decide to be a priest?"

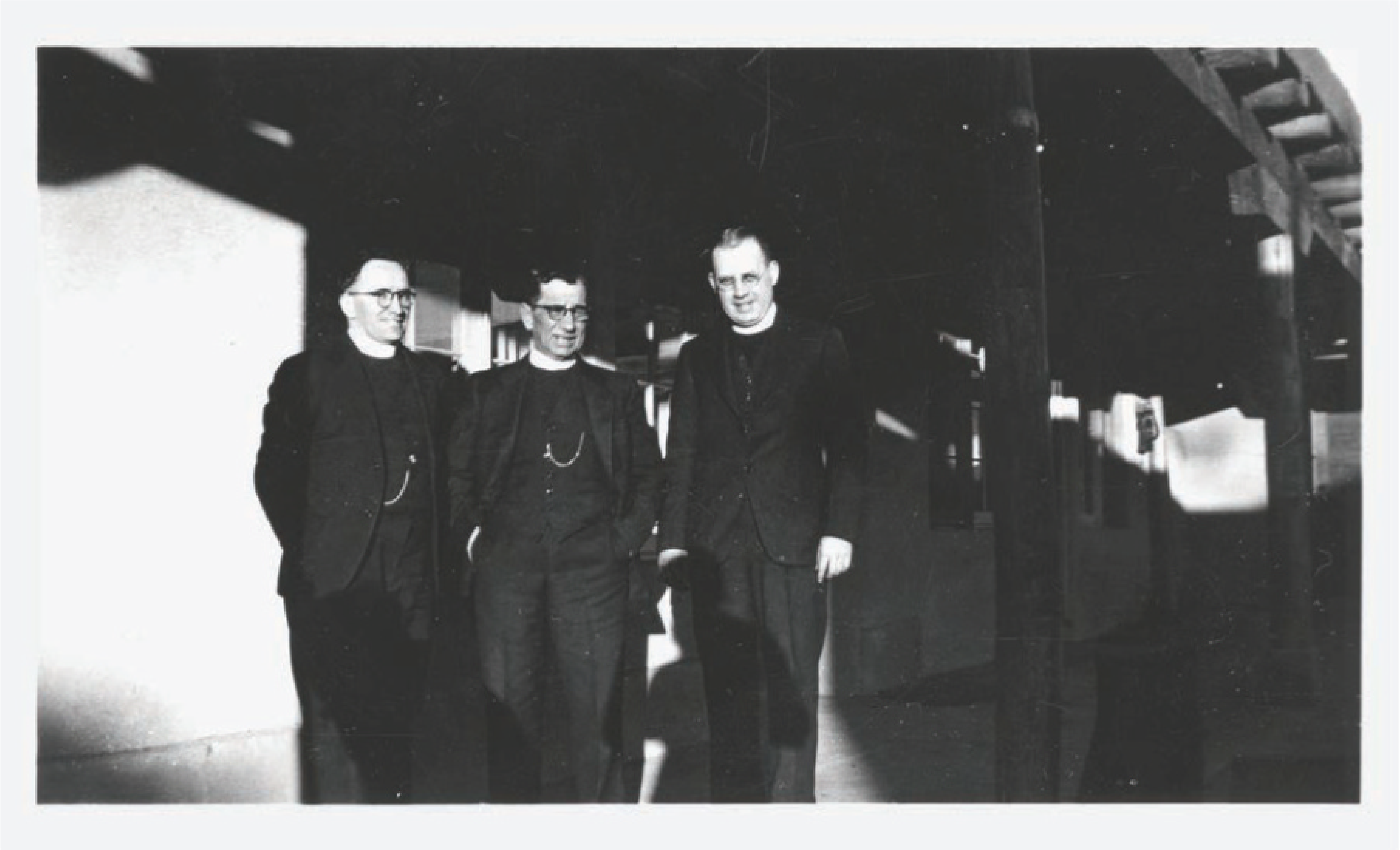
"A priest?" he'd say, not one for metaphor or irony. "The priest was dead."

THEY ARE ALL DEAD NOW: the priest and the bishops, my father and mother, their father and mother, and all the fathers and mothers in the photo in its frame. After all the projections and demographics—the charts of bell curves and their contingencies, shaped like tsunamis and hillocks, wee breasts and bottom lines—the numbers on mortality are really convincing, hovering as they do around, well, more or less exactly 100 percent.

"Death steals everything," wrote Jim Harrison, the poet, fictionist, and gourmand, before he died writing a poem four springtimes ago, "except our stories."

When the dead priest's father, Tomás Lynch, left the coastal townland of Moveen in 1890, to chance his future in a place called Michigan, he stopped at the parish graveyard, Moyarta, at the mouth of the River Shannon in Carrigaholt, to say goodbye, to pray at his dead mother's grave. Still buoyed by the "American wake" that his siblings and neighbors and aged father had given him the night before (they knew emigration was a kind of death, a disappearance from which there'd be no return), he might not have noticed the deep scar of a trench behind him. It was a long tear deep in the greensward in which, 40 years earlier, those dead of the famine—felled by starvation or fever, or both—had reached such numbers that they overwhelmed even the Irish appetite for wakes and funerals. These famine dead were swung into the open pit without witness or rubric, prayer or pipers, eulogy or obituary. No roses were tossed in their grave as emblems of mourners letting go, but rather shovels of quicklime to hasten the erasure of corruptible and possibly contagious flesh.

The fear of death, of ceasing to be, includes the fear that our stories will die with us, and won't be told or will be told incorrectly. Or that they will be overwhelmed by what erased us from time—famine or pestilence or the horrors of war—so that our lives and times are not one-of-a-kind, but are one of the many and



*The author's great-uncle, Thomas Patrick Lynch (*right*), survived the Spanish flu as a boy and became a priest. A year after this picture was taken in 1935, in Santa Fe, he died of influenza and pneumonia.*

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF THOMAS LYNCH

meaningless, nameless and nonspecific elements of a collective terror: a plague, blight, genocide, or bombing, a historic event that buries our individual, personal histories. How unimaginable that our deaths could go unremarked on and unremarkable.

Among the catalog of pandemic terrors is that such killers undermine our triumphalist sense of American exceptionalism, along with our belief that money and talent can fix any trouble. To a virus, we humans are all the same. Our nation, like some of us, has more money than time. Yet the more we endeavor to deny the pandemic's scope, the more likely the scourge may be to deny us both.

By getting the dead where they need to go—to ground or fire, tomb or sea, whatever abyss we consign them to—the living get where they need to be: to the edge of a life we will live without them. Such are the dual-purpose dynamics of a good funeral. And good grief is a sort of romance in reverse, by which the heartbroken seek to retrieve the heart's investments in the ones we lose. Such "grief work" takes time and large-muscle enactments of holding on and letting go, shoulder and shovel work, witness and vigil work. It is no cakewalk.

Victorians allowed for extended periods of mourning, and their culture allowed for "proper respects"—the pause and tender patience granted the bereaved. The current emergency disallows all but the most needful duty to burn or bury the dead on a schedule advanced by a witless virus. Adding to our nation's annual death rate by numbers we cannot accurately project or prevent, the coronavirus overwhelms not only our medical, financial, social, and religious infrastructures, but our mortuary ones as well. For many mourners, the postponed and bodiless obsequies will make the lonely deaths only more unmooring—like trying to understand love when the bride is absent from her nuptials; or initiation and new life, naming and claiming, when the baby is missing from the baptism.

Faith, we are told, inoculates against fear. We are all in this together, the president says. I wonder. Though I was named after my father's dead uncle, my faith has been shaken into a provisional pose. Rather than serve a bishop or church, I chose, like my father, "to serve the living by caring for the dead." Some days it seems obvious that a loving God's in charge; others it seems we are entirely alone.

If death steals everything except our stories, pandemics—like famines and holocausts—do their best not to grant us the time it takes to pay respects, to get our story right, to get our story told, to share the story with family and friends, to tell them that what took us in the end may have been COVID-19, but that fact is only a footnote, not our story. What really takes our breath away is the beauty of being, and the beauty of being of the ones we love. *A*

Thomas Lynch, who has worked as a funeral director in Michigan for 50 years, is the author, most recently, of The Depositions: New and Selected Essays. *His* The Bone Rosary: New and Selected Poems *will be published in 2021.*

II.

THE LAST DAY OF MY OLD LIFE

Surviving cancer during a pandemic

By Caitlin Flanagan

The good thing about having Stage IV cancer is that nobody thinks you're bellyaching when you complain about it. It's a field day for the discontented. You get to wander around muttering to yourself, "Stage IV cancer! Could it get any worse?"

Rilke taught us not to seek the answers but to love the questions. Good advice. Now I'm stuck in my house muttering, "Stage IV cancer during a pandemic! Could it get any—*oh, never mind*."

I'm one of the people all of this social distancing is helping to stay alive, so far. I belong to the group of people—the infirm, the weak—who certain conservatives have said should offer themselves up to the coronavirus. I'm part of the "cure" that mustn't be worse than "the problem," according to Donald Trump. Glenn Beck seems to think we should show our patriotism by volunteering to be killed by the virus rather than "kill the country."

I've come close to dying a few times, and I'm not afraid anymore, just sad. I'm like a war correspondent or an assassin—all I need is the call, and I'll be gone in the night. I wish I had something helpful to say, now, about fear; for a long time, I was so terrified that I could hardly breathe. Somehow, you get used to it.

But if I die from the coronavirus, it will be one more unnecessary American death. Every epidemiologist in the world warned us the pandemic was coming, yet we were totally unprepared. And even after governors and public-health experts performed the astonishing feat of getting huge numbers of Americans to stay home, Trump continued to undermine them.

In March, he got bored and floated the idea that we'd all be sprung by Easter. In April, Central Park became a field hospital and refrigerated trucks were moving through New York City. Easter—victory over death—came and went. We tuned out the president, and listened only to experts. The experts said we weren't getting out anytime soon.

WHEN I WAS DIAGNOSED with cancer, there were no smartphones. Moms had efficient little cameras in their purses; fathers carried enormous cameras with zoom lenses, which were so complicated that the dads were always missing the big moment and begging kids to restage it. Because of a mom camera, I have a photograph of the very last day of my old life.

I was a chaperone for a preschool field trip to the Los Angeles Fire Department Museum. (Of course I was; I loved everything about having little kids. I loved going to the library and to the park and to the miniature railroad at Griffith Park, and I loved watching *Clifford the Big Red Dog* and lying on a blanket in the front yard past bedtime, looking at the stars.) On that field trip, a friend happened to snap a picture of me talking to one of my twin boys.

I still feel sad when I look at it. There I am, so happy and—as far as I knew—healthy. And there's my little boy on the very last day of his childhood before he had to understand frightening ideas and words. Joan Didion wrote, "It is easy to see the beginnings of things, and harder to see the ends." But in this case, the end of things was very clear: Our life changed—and stayed changed—the day after that field trip.

Since then I have counted my life in graduations. I sat in the back row of the preschool graduation trying not to cry, which meant stopping myself from saying the words *This could be the only graduation I go to.* Everyone else was so happy and bustling, but I was in a far place and couldn't get back.

The boys graduated from kindergarten the next year and I was there—knocked down from a year of treatment, bald, but starting to recover. I made it through first and second grade, and I thought maybe I could shoot for the elementary-school graduation, but when the boys were in third grade my cancer came back. That one should have got me. If it had happened a few years earlier, it probably would have. But the science was a big step ahead of me.

A LONG TIME AGO, when I was still a young person without a single thought of cancer, a scientist named Dennis Slamon was sitting in his lab at UCLA and he had an idea: that one of the most aggressive forms of breast cancer, the kind marked by an overexpression of the gene HER2/neu, could be treated with an antibody called Herceptin. The story of his fight to get the research funded, and of the women who volunteered to take part in the clinical trials, has been told many times. It's the story of a stubborn scientist who was sure he was onto something, and who wouldn't stop until he had the funding and data to prove it.

When I was diagnosed, Herceptin had just been approved for limited use in my type of cancer. The practice where I was treated was allowed to give it to me under certain protocols: I received it with my chemo, and stayed on it for a year. That wasn't nearly long enough.

Five years after my diagnosis, my luck ran out: a metastatic recurrence with tumors in my lungs and chest wall and liver. I pretty much assumed that was it for me. But I got a couple of good tips.

The first was from a nurse at my oncology practice, who risked his job by closing the door of the exam room and suggesting that I get a second opinion. The second one, the one that saved my life, was from someone who knows a lot about cancer: "You have to get closer to the science."

The science was at UCLA, where Slamon and his team of researchers were changing the fates of millions of women. I left the private practice and became the patient of a brilliant young oncologist in Slamon's lab, Sara Hurvitz. My former oncologist had suggested sectioning my liver. Hurvitz had no intention of doing that. She would give me six treatments of chemotherapy; halfway through I would get a scan to see if it was working. In cancer treatment, the gold medal is finding out that the tumors are shrinking. Silver—and who wouldn't want a silver medal?—is that you are stable. There is no bronze.

The day my husband and I drove to the appointment where Hurvitz would tell us the results of the scan was an experience of anxiety and fear I can't convey. The fear you feel when you're waiting to hear the results of a cancer scan is different from when you're in physical danger. You have the same adrenaline overload but you can't go into fight-or-flight. You can't even freeze. You have to keep putting one foot after the other: out of the parking garage, into the lobby, into the elevator. You have to have a nurse check your vitals and you have to sit on the table with the white paper.

Sara Hurvitz came in. All of my tumors were gone. Undetectable on the scan.

My husband and I nearly fainted. We went to a hotel and had cocktails—which "aren't a good idea on chemo," I had been repeatedly told. Those cocktails were the best idea of my life.

I finished the treatments, and every three weeks I got an infusion of Herceptin. With these interventions, I enjoyed a full remission that lasted 11 years. Do you know what it's like for a mother of school-age children to be given an 11-year remission? And it was the direct consequence of the UCLA scientist who never gave up.

Now here I am—here we all are—with our health in the hands of Donald Trump, M.D. When the coronavirus appeared on the horizon, he did not get closer to the science. He mocked science. He said the panic around the virus and the criticism of his response were a big hoax; he said the outbreak would end with warmer weather in April; he said the virus was no more serious than the common flu; he said there would be a vaccine soon; he said the virus would suddenly disappear "like a miracle"; he said there were plenty of "beautiful" tests and anyone who wanted one could have one; he said the number of U.S. infections was going "substantially down, not up." He said an antimalarial drug cured COVID-19 and the FDA had approved it for use by prescription. He said there were only 15 patients with COVID-19 in the U.S. and the number, "within a couple of days, is going to be down to close to zero."

I sat in the back of the preschool graduation trying not to cry, which meant stopping myself from saying the words This could be the only graduation I go to.

He said, "That's a pretty good job we've done."

AFTER I MADE IT to my boys' sixth-grade and high-school graduations, I thought I'd have college in the bag. But I got sick again last year, when they were juniors. After the news of the bad scan, I told the doctor I'd see her in two weeks—I was on my way to Italy, to visit my son who was studying there. When you've had cancer long enough, you realize you can't put off anything.

A second recurrence of metastatic cancer is always a big deal, and I will be on treatment for the rest of my life. But the HER2 armamentarium now holds enough drugs that I could live for many years. The science has stayed a step ahead of me.

When I first learned I had cancer, a friend told me that even during chemo I would still have my life, that I would still go forward, still do the things I wanted to do. I didn't believe her. I recently looked through all of our photo albums—something I never do, because I feel so sad about what happened—and I was stunned by what I saw. I didn't see pictures of two sad boys. I saw picture after picture of two boys with huge smiles on their faces, pictures of vacations and soccer games and art classes and all the fun to be had on the big swing set I bought at Costco when I first got sick. In Costco, it had looked a reasonable size. In our small backyard, it looked like a condo building had gone up. It looked ridiculous. And the boys loved it. Looking at all of those pictures, I realized something: This was my life's work. I gave the boys the best childhood I possibly could.

A year ago, I sat on a couch with my phone in my hand, waiting to place a call: The Mount Vernon Grand Hotel, which is near Kenyon College, accepts reservations exactly one year before graduation, and books up in an hour. I got through and said something I'd never said before: "I'd like a suite please." Reserving a hotel suite in central Ohio is not the grand gesture it would be in Venice, but it meant something to me. I'd made it.

Today my husband called to relinquish the suite, because the graduation ceremony is postponed. No one knows for how long. Maybe I'll get to my sons' college graduations, and maybe I won't.

Stage IV cancer during a pandemic when Donald Trump is the president! Could it get any worse? No.

Caitlin Flanagan is a staff writer at The Atlantic.

III.

“HOW AM I FEELING? LIKE A WANDERING WIND.”

Among Boston’s homeless as they navigate a city buffeted by plague

By James Parker

> I’m sitting at the mall charging my phone and watching people walk by. They look like they don’t know what they’re doing or where they’re going. I’m not talking “going shopping” or “buying things”—I mean they don’t have a clue what’s going on. They all live in a big bubble that they think is going to protect them. But when the shit hits the fan they will be the first to run and hide, and the people living on the streets will be there to maybe help and maybe not. Me, I will help anybody that gets hurt or needs help.

These words were written in 2016, by a man named Robert. He wrote them at the Black Seed Writers Group, a once-a-week session for homeless, transitional, and recently housed writers that I run in downtown Boston. We’ve been doing Writers Group, and publishing the writers’ work in a magazine called *The Pilgrim*, since 2011. Robert (I haven’t seen him in a few months) used to make the coffee—was famous for it, in fact.

Reading Robert’s words today, I feel a tremendous pressure behind my eyes. Apocalyptic or millenarian thinking is a fixture in the homeless community. Many times over the years, I’ve been warned about Chinese black ops, FEMA confinement camps in the desert, the Second Coming, etc. That’s one end of the spectrum. At the other is a simple X-ray perception of society seen from the bottom up. It’s clinical, it’s prophetic, and it tells us over and over again that American life, the American self, as currently (or formerly) constituted rests on pillars of delusion.

I was downtown at 9:30 on a recent Tuesday morning, in the spacious basement of the Cathedral Church of St. Paul, for the regular session of Writers Group. The group has continued to meet, and continues (under great pressure) to hold its shape, but this was our first pandemic meeting—anything but regular. Twenty or so writers were in attendance, half our usual contingent. There were no pens, there was no paper: I didn’t want any materials going back and forth. On a non-plague Tuesday, my team and I would have been handing the writers typed-up and stapled-together versions of what they’d worked on the previous week; none of that now. So where there would have been writing, where there would have been words, there was a void. The mood in the room, however, was within our regular mood range, which is to say somewhat merry, somewhat tense—here a pocket of abstraction, there a grimace—but settled, and streaked generally with a rarefied hilarity and graciousness.

Me, I was jumpy. My mindset, jangling with information, was out of sync. As people approached me, people I would normally hug, fist-bump, or otherwise affectionately collide with, I stuck up a blue-gloved hand like a gendarme in a ’50s movie. “Six feet! Six feet back!” No one, these writers have taught me, is more attuned to the flinch of a squeamish citizen, no one knows better the phobia that passes as everyday fastidiousness, than the person who has lived on the street. It’s not his or her sixth sense; it’s his or her seventh or eighth. Now writer after writer was bouncing off my nervous force field. Social distancing as bourgeois hang-up. A luxury, like “personal space.” Clearly not. *Clearly* not. Right? I felt schizoid in these moments.

We couldn’t write, so I read some poems aloud. I read Dylan Thomas’s “And Death Shall Have No Dominion,” W. H. Auden’s “As I Walked Out One Evening,” Ted Hughes’s “Crow’s Fall.” Serious, beautiful, hard, witty, eyes-open poems that do not flinch. That do not recoil. *Strapped to a wheel, yet they shall not break … You shall love your crooked neighbour / With your crooked heart … Crow returned charred black …* Gravely, tolerantly, the writers listened. Under my declaiming I heard rumbles of assent. A weak or meretricious poem would have perished in that atmosphere, would have curled up and died. These poems did not. I read Philip Larkin’s “The North Ship”: crystalline early Larkin. Three ships; one goes east, one goes west.

But the third went wide and far
Into an unforgiving sea
Under a fire-spilling star,
And it was rigged for a long journey.

Then we wrote our own poem, orally, in one take, with everybody who wanted to contributing a line:

How am I feeling? Like a
    wandering wind.
It's crazy what's going on.
Get this bullshit out of here.
Fucked-up, insecure, neurotic
    and emotional.
If they cancel the Best Buddies
    bike ride, sparks will fly.
We're taking precautions. I think
    we're overdoing it.
Confusing motion for progress,
    fear makes us children.
Spare change. People who change ought
    to be spared.
I'm feeling fine and I'm feeling
    prayerful.
Every day I'm still learning to give.
We may not be looking for pity,
but this damn virus bullshit is
    getting shitty.

Robert's piece from 2016 ends like this: "When the shit hits the fan the people of power run and hide, and they don't care if the little or the poor live or die because all they do is look after themselves." Homelessness is a life of exposure, and hazard, and loss of control. Who you're with, what they're giving you or taking from you—you have no say. So are we all homeless now, in the face of this thing? No. Right now, if you're on the street in Boston, you're experiencing a drastic reduction in places to eat, places to sit, places to use the bathroom, places to charge your phone, places to be safe, places to be. We, the housed and the comfortable, cannot imagine it, could not endure it. We don't have the wisdom. They, the truly homeless, will help us if they can. Of course, they are utterly unprotected. Reality belongs to them, now and always. God loves the dispossessed, and this is why.

Members of the Black Seed Writers Group, a once-a-week session for homeless writers in downtown Boston, photographed on April 7

James Parker is a staff writer at The Atlantic.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JILLIAN FREYER

IV.

THE DISASTER BEAT

What I learned when I went from reporting on catastrophes to living in one

By Vann R. Newkirk II

On the night of Wednesday, March 11, I stepped out of one catastrophe and into another.

My colleagues and I were working late, putting the finishing touches on *Floodlines*, an eight-part podcast about the long aftermath of Hurricane Katrina that would be launching the next day. I'd spent the better part of a year traveling back and forth between Washington, D.C., and New Orleans, immersing myself in the stories of Katrina's victims and heroes, trying to get my head around the immense human suffering and colossal failures of governance that followed the breaking of the levees 15 years ago.

We had endeavored to distill something meaningful and useful from that modern American disaster, in hopes that what we learned might—someday, somehow—help someone. But until we wrapped up our work, as I wiped my desk with bleach at 3 a.m., it had not occurred to me that I might be that someone, and that someday might be now.

Hours earlier, the Utah Jazz center Rudy Gobert and the actor Tom Hanks had revealed that they'd tested positive for COVID-19, and the NBA had announced that it was suspending its season. Earlier that day, the World Health Organization had declared the novel coronavirus a pandemic. Our phones kept buzzing with a pileup of push notifications as we scrambled to finish our work.

As a reporter who covers disasters, I thought I'd become keenly attuned to them, prepared for them. When I first learned about a virus emerging in Wuhan, China, I remembered hearing the hum of generators and tasting the smoke of burned gasoline in Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria. Still, the threat of COVID-19 felt abstract. Having arranged my work life for a long time around the monolith of Katrina, I could not see other shadows in its shade.

Or so I tried to tell myself. Now I think some part of me simply had not accepted the conclusions of my own Katrina reporting: that power corrupts and American political leadership often fails; that the country's deep-woven racial and social inequities will eternally resurface to punish the poor and the black; that magical thinking about American ingenuity will not save us from natural disaster and human folly. Despite everything I knew, my faith in this country ran deeper than I realized. Until that night, I still thought America—whether through some miracle drug or cosmic, city-on-a-hill blessing—would escape or vanquish the virus.

And someday, surely, it will. But in the meantime, I don't know when I will be able to see my immunocompromised mother again. I don't know which friend or family member might end up stricken, or dead. Yesterday, I was reduced to witnessing the birth of my second child on FaceTime, because under quarantine rules I was not allowed in the delivery ward. I watch in despair as all across the country, yet again, poor folks and people of color bear the brunt of the economic and mortal costs of a disaster, a result of both historical political injustice and contemporary political ineptitude.

I'd like to think that COVID-19 has finally stripped me of my last illusions, as Katrina stripped New Orleanians of theirs. But whatever comes next, I will draw strength from the stories and memories of the thousands of Americans who confronted catastrophe before me—Katrina and Maria and 9/11 and the Great Depression and the 1918 flu and the Civil War and all the others—and persevered. *A*

Vann R. Newkirk II is a staff writer at The Atlantic.

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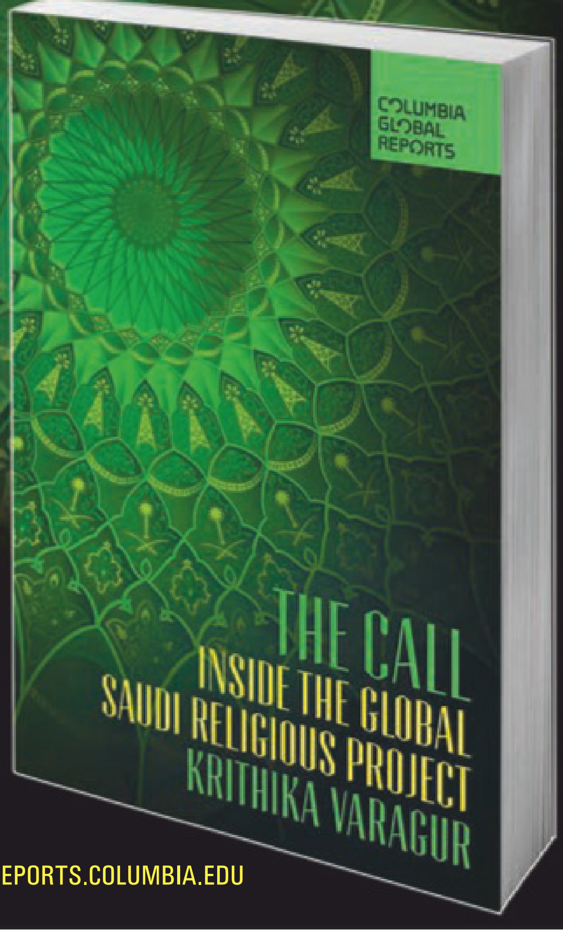

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Elinor Carucci holding her daughter, Emmanuelle, in a photograph from Mother*, Carucci's 2013 book of photos on parenting*

V.

A MOTHERHOOD RESET

How quarantining showed me what my children had been missing—and what I had, too

By Maggie Bullock

What's that thing, Mom?
Max, you know what that is.
What's it called?
That's your bra.
Right.
Is it white?
Not exactly. This color is called,
uh … nude.
Oh, nude. Mom?
Yes, Max?
Do you poop in your bra?

Social isolation, Day 17. In the kitchen, in the bathroom, in bed, on walks, my husband and I, plus our boys—Max, 2, and Finn, 5—are all alone, all together, all the time. These weeks have been wild and strange and exhausting. They have been many things, but chief among them is, I think, *intimate.* I picture the four of us exiting quarantine as a single, many-headed organism.

On Friday, March 13, the email arrived from my sons' preschool, its subject line devastatingly simple: *Closure*. I put the phone down. I couldn't quite bring myself to read the rest. I felt my incredible luck—the worst thing to befall me during this global pandemic, so far at least, was a state-mandated staycation with my favorite people on Earth. Still, a jolt of actual panic seized me. How would we make it through with no outings, no playdates, no relief?

How would I get any work done? This part answered itself almost immediately: At least initially, I wouldn't. Within days, my freelance career dried up, every story in the hopper vanished—*poof!* As a financial hit, it was bad, but it could have been far worse. I was already set to begin work on a book, the contract for which remains intact (I checked). As an emotional hit, it felt heavier. Overnight I went from working journalist to homeschooling mom. Let's be clear: I didn't feel demoted. I felt deeply unqualified.

My husband is a self-employed architect; we are roughly equal earners. Until a few weeks ago, child care was the biggest line item in our monthly budget. At times we have spent more on it than we could rationally afford, a fact about which I have felt largely unconflicted. I have respect for parents who choose to stay home with kids, and respect and empathy for those who have no choice in the matter. But more than once, I've joked that my only regret about hiring Finn's first, beloved babysitter when he was four months old was not having hired her sooner. My best advice to pregnant friends is to line up child care. You don't have to do this alone, I tell them. Subtext: *I* cannot do this alone.

It took me about three days of being home with my boys to recognize that our new lifestyle was not completely without precedent. Certain aspects of confinement had an eerie familiarity: the 24/7 relentlessness, the isolation, the satisfaction of small domestic victories. I'd done this before—twice, on maternity leave.

On one late-night, wine-fueled Zoom call, I listened to my women friends commiserate. One had lost her job; another suspected hers might be next. A third, a midwife, was delivering babies in a hospital with insufficient protective gear, worrying about what she was bringing home to her kids. All, meanwhile, were managing families and schooling young children. So I felt sheepish sharing the idea taking shape in my mind, that somehow I wasn't hating this time as much as I was supposed to. I'd begun to wonder, in fact, if it was a reset that my family—or really, that I as a mother—sorely needed. Maybe I *didn't* have to scramble for new assignments. Maybe I could reframe quarantine. It could be my third maternity leave.

I recall my two actual maternity leaves as twin blurs of never-before-felt tenderness and acute stress. Both times I was recovering from a C-section with an infant who had difficulty nursing. Nipples bled. Spousal tempers flared. Everybody cried. The bottom line? Those two hormone-soaked stretches are the only times I've *ever* been in charge of my own children for longer than a weekend (aside from vacations) without some degree of child care. Is it any wonder I initially dreaded the prospect of parenting without professional or familial assistance?

Marathon parenting—or, as it is known to regular full-time caretakers, "Tuesday"—is the sort of thing, I am learning, that you can't do well until you do it a lot. You need ideas, a schedule. You need Cosmic Kids

Yoga (look it up on YouTube), *Sparkle Stories*, a rotation of art projects that can hold a child's attention for more time than they take to set up. Most crucially, you need low expectations, zero anticipation that any of these projects will be accomplished.

To clarify, I can afford to be relatively calm about all of this because I am not doing this by myself. While I do handle "mom school" most mornings, my husband is equally involved. He's the one who takes the boys outside and runs them hard, like a pair of terriers sprung from their crate. He operates the survivalist-boot-camp arm of our operation, leading them in frog-spotting and hole-digging, equipping them with potentially finger-severing tools, and goading Finn to, say, repeatedly roll an empty tire up a hill.

As for the children's perspective, I'm pretty sure social distancing is the greatest thing that ever happened to them, the windfall of their short lives. They get all of us almost all the time. Finn chatters about his friends, but little evidence suggests that either of them misses school. This realization is, for me, bittersweet. I can't think about how happy our kids are to be with us—just us—without acknowledging the fact that that's the one thing we've never given them. It is the one thing that is truly off the table.

I've always relied on a convenient certainty that preschool is a win-win. High-energy as they are, surely our pups would chew the legs off the table if we kept them at home, and they'd miss out on the early socialization that I'm convinced (and *remain* convinced) has put them on the road to becoming tolerable human beings. But the truth is, they are there not because that's what they need. They're there because that's what *we* need. And when school reopens, they'll be right back there again. I'm okay with that, but maybe not as okay as I used to be. Yes, I have to work to pay the bills, and I've always known that working is essential to my sanity and sense of self. But now I have a keener sense of what my boys—and I—will be missing.

Something is happening between my kids and me that I don't think I'll fully understand until this is all over. Finn and I spent the better part of Monday lying side by side on our bellies, doodling on an enormous swath of butcher paper I had taped to the floor. It was exactly the scene I used to picture when I imagined what it might be like to have children, and yet, somehow, we had never done it. By late afternoon, I was showing him how to draw dogs and people in a way he hadn't tried. Yesterday, he sat at the kitchen table and proceeded to draw one figure after the next, better than I had taught him, with a confidence I'd never seen.

Finn is a complex creature. If he thinks he's not good at a new skill, he can be heartbreakingly self-critical. No question, he and I would not have found the openness that made that late-afternoon drawing lesson possible had we not whiled away the entire day—and maybe had weeks of togetherness before that—leading up to it. Something about the specific slowness of shutdown life lends itself to these moments. There are a lot of things I've strived to be, as a parent. *Slow* has never been one of them.

When I try to put my finger on what is really different about my current relationship

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with my sons, it's not the isolation. It is that, for once, I'm not working. (Except, of course, I am: I'm writing this.) Without the usual press of deadlines, I am not pushing my kid's swing with one hand while scrolling through my inbox with the other, worrying about what I'm missing or not getting done.

Here's the recent revelation that blows my mind: The more I'm with my children, the *less* they drive me crazy. In our normal life, I go over to friends' houses and marvel as they calmly chop root vegetables while holding forth on the Democratic primary, as if there weren't a pack of children burning rubber around the kitchen island like it's the final lap at Daytona. I've never been able to do that. The normal human cacophony produced by my sons regularly sends me over the edge. I've considered this constitutional brittleness to be both my primary flaw as a parent and proof that I wasn't built for mothering all the livelong day.

But I'm becoming conditioned to the chaos. I'm learning which of my toddler's tantrums to soothe, and which to ignore—mastering the kind of benign negligence that makes family life tolerable for everyone. One recent morning, my children and I achieved a flow that felt borderline balletic. Breakfast rolled into outdoor time, which rolled into drawing. Sure, there was screeching; sure, when the 5-year-old rolled his eyes like a seasoned tween, I did fantasize about bashing myself over the head with a cast-iron skillet—but only briefly! We kept moving along, and then it was lunchtime, and when their father came downstairs to take over, I felt as heroic as Captain "Sully" Sullenberger, standing on the wing of an Airbus A320 in the middle of the Hudson.

Naturally, comeuppance came, swift and brutal. Later that afternoon, I found my children detestable, our arrangement untenable. Max's trademark high-pitched, glass-shattering shriek was a personal assault on my stability. After his 19th or 20th round of it, I hurled a bag of shredded cheese across the kitchen. "Stop screaming," I screamed, spittle flying, as both kids stared at me, stunned. Mom school was closed for the day.

I'm not proud of the flying cheese, but it is partly why I find this "third maternity leave" theory handy. Maternity leave is rare, and it's intense, but it's also—God willing—temporary. When a friend texted late the other night to confess that she'd yelled at her daughter repeatedly that day, I wrote back something that a few weeks ago would have sounded to my own ears like an empty platitude: *Just start again tomorrow*. The strangest aspect of this grand social experiment may also be the most useful one: Every day is Groundhog Day. To me, that makes every day a do-over. I may not have had the courage, or frankly the desire, to voluntarily take time out from life and work to do what I'm doing now—try, and fail, and try again with my kids. Yet it's the chance I've been given. *A*

Maggie Bullock is a freelance writer based in Amherst, Massachusetts.

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VI.

HOW I BECAME ESSENTIAL

Delivering meals during a pandemic

By Darcy Courteau

When the coronavirus arrived in Washington, D.C., and Homeland Security named me an “essential critical infrastructure worker,” free to work as others sheltered in place, I felt like a wallflower at a party suddenly beckoned to the dance floor. I nearly glanced right and left—no other girls there—and put a hand to my bosom. *Me?*

I doubt I’ve ever before been considered critical or essential to anyone not immediately waiting on a meal I was delivering. Lurking at restaurants until my app dings and offers me a job, then dodging in and out of traffic on my bicycle, I normally drift between invisible and pain in the ass. But here we are.

I’d been sitting out the last few winter weeks, looking forward to riding in warm weather. It arrived on the second day of spring, 71 degrees and balmy, when the coronavirus claimed its first victim in the city.

I suited up for my evening rounds. Leggings in a light-colored print that would flash in headlights, layers of tops, a windbreaker. My backpack: a peasant basket I’d bought in Laos, with an insulated delivery bag inside. I’ve dotted the basket with reflective tape.

There are people who deliver in cars, and then there are the rest of us on everything else. My bicycle is a 1980s Bridgestone that a friend gave me in New Orleans; a woman had traded it to him for work on her car. Someone stole it, but months later I spotted it on Frenchmen Street and got it back. Bike enthusiasts walk up to me to say the Bridgestone is a museum piece. I thought it was badass until I saw another courier, a young fellow a head taller than me, inside a Thai restaurant with a skateboard under his arm.

“Do you blow people’s minds when you show up on that?” I asked.

“Yeah.”

I ADDED Purell and nitrile gloves to my gear check. Those were the early days, when we met the pandemic with a pioneer spirit. The coronavirus was terrifying, but fear was a novelty then, and we felt a sense of possibility and adventure. We stocked up on dried beans, and our aunts sewed masks.

I met a cluster of my fellow Molly Pitchers outside an Italian place, where we waited 45 minutes for the food. That kind of wait trashes a night’s earnings, but we comforted ourselves that our apps were stacking on bonuses, clearly having a hard time getting enough people on the road.

A guy with a slight Caribbean accent had been driving for both Uber and Lyft but switched to food deliveries when the virus arrived and he didn’t get passengers. Another guy had worked in a Georgetown restaurant, and when it closed he bought a $700 electric bike for delivering; this was his second day. A guy with a wounded affect had driven for Instacart in the morning and switched to deliveries at night. He wanted to start a side hustle giving financial advice. We swapped tips on getting out of debt.

The scene at the restaurant was confusing—the staff had set up a table inside for checking in, but a socially distanced crowd of customers waited outside for the orders they’d placed. They chided each of us as we went in, thinking we’d cut the line. When one of us, trying to be helpful, said that they could check in too, a man in the crowd refused, yelling, “There’s a global pandemic!” We essential and critical workers shook our heads.

Looking out at the crowd, I remembered texts from my brother, who’d begun beseeching me in January to prepare for the coronavirus, sending lists of things to purchase. I found this entertaining; I have since bought everything but the firearm. The apocalypse my brother has been waiting for all his life, in which one is called to defend one’s stash of lentils and iodized salt, had always seemed ridiculous …

RAIDERS
indigo
indigo

Clockwise from top left: *Darnell Young and his skateboard. The author's bicycle. Tymeer Roberts delivering meals on his scooter. Indigo, a popular restaurant in the H Street corridor of Washington, D.C.*

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JARED SOARES

Outside a pan-Asian joint that sells Cambodian street food and $28 five-spice fried chicken, another deliverer, in waist-length braids and latex gloves, backed away from me. He stood by a Dodge Ram with his landscaping-company decal on the door. He'd been out since morning, watching Netflix in the cab while waiting for assignments, and had made $75 so far. He'd gone through a few dozen pairs of gloves; he had a secret source in Maryland.

It was a spooked and cheerful night. We weren't making many deliveries, but we were getting bonuses. Customers thanked me as if I'd done something special for them, even the ones who requested "no-contact deliveries" and waited behind a door while I left their goods outside. They tipped the kind of fat tips that you normally get only from people with sleeve tattoos, a sliver demographic on Capitol Hill.

I BECAME a bicycle courier after returning from a month-long reporting trip to Mexico in 2018. When I got back my funds were so low that when I splurged on celery I ate it all, even the leaves and the base. It would be a while before I got paid for the story, but I was counting on a high-paying gig facilitating grant reviews for government agencies, which I'd had each spring. News that it had been pushed to late summer came like a punch in the face.

I had $1.77 in the bank when I got my first weekly payout from the app. I remember opening the box of stuff I bought from Amazon, things I'd needed for ages. I pulled out a sack of dog-poop bags and stared at it grimly. "The fruits of my labors," I muttered to my dog.

My evening rounds became the happiest part of my day. When the weather isn't horrible, I love riding, and the sheer goofiness of my mission delighted me. I was my favorite fictional character, the fat medievalist Ignatius J. Reilly, pushing around his hot-dog cart and musing about his downward spin on Fortuna's wheel. Between deliveries I tooled around backstreets, practicing languages with an app, listening to audiobooks, and peering into boxes of free stuff that D.C. folks leave out. One night I came across a box of beautiful dresses, size extra-small. I threw them in my basket, and zoomed them over to the petite staff at the Thai place.

EVERY NIGHT in the coronavirus era has its mood. If that first Friday was one of prophylactics and camaraderie, Saturday was haunted. The weather was cold and the streets were empty. You could do U-ies in the middle of Chinatown.

An upscale pub near the National Mall was locked; you had to call them, and a security guard would come out and hand off an order, reading each item on the ticket like a newbie.

Outside Indigo, an Indian place with a funky international-backpacker vibe, the streetlight revealed an intergalactic helmet and a fat-tired scooter with a seat on a post.

Every night in the coronavirus era has its mood. If that first Friday was one of prophylactics and camaraderie, Saturday was haunted.

Tymeer recognized my basket. When we'd met months before, his battery wasn't lasting the night, so he did his final deliveries carrying the scooter onto the free streetcar in the area and walking the rest of the way to homes. People had stopped to admire his ride, and then he gathered his ramen in one hand and with the other led the hobbled, magnificent scooter away.

He'd since bought two new batteries, he told me. The old one had caught fire. He pulled up a video of it burning.

On his cheekbones, steel piercings embedded in his skin twinkled like stars.

ON SUNDAY, my app lured in too many of us with bonuses. I got one delivery in two hours. Normally, I could pass time sitting outside Whole Foods, but all the tables had been removed. Before the coronavirus, I could use the bathroom in restaurants, refill my water bottle. But no more.

Monday I got two orders in three hours and made $16.58. I'd filled a small spray bottle with diluted bleach and entertained myself by spraying down restaurants' doorknobs. Malaise had already settled in, along with the realization that COVID-19 was going to be long and slow, and that we might lose our homes and dreams and even people we love, but our small, dull problems weren't going anywhere. Maybe that last part is just me, but I don't think so.

I dawdled at Indigo. It is beloved in D.C., always packed, and the takeout station is a well-oiled machine. Nidhi, who owns the place with her husband, Dinesh, was in the kitchen. She said 22 people work at the restaurant. They'd cut shifts but had managed to keep everyone on the payroll. Two people stood outside waiting on orders, and me.

Farmbird was so quiet, I was greeted like an old friend. Someone I'd never spoken to came from the back to say hello.

LAST SPRING a *New York Times* reporter spent a few days as a bicycle delivery person and wrote about it. He got it all in there—the blind rides that spit you out on the other end of town, the lousy tippers, the apps' cat-and-mouse with bonuses, the bad pay.

But what is the alternative? It would be one thing if riders had a choice between delivering meals and working at *The New York Times*. And those dwindling manufacturing jobs that nonprofessional workers are supposed to want? A lot don't. Some of us weren't meant to be employed, and we'll work twice as hard at our own hustles to avoid punching a clock.

It's true the job can be hard as hell. I don't depend on it now, but the year I lived off deliveries turned me into an athlete, which is unbecoming after a certain age. It's nothing to retire on.

When I started riding, I would have been destroyed by a bike repair that cost more than a few dollars, let alone a broken bone.

I once crashed my bike on ice outside a restaurant while trying to make rent. I've favored my Dr. Martens Mary Janes for cool-weather riding ever since the soles of my waterproof moccasins slipped—I hadn't heeded the online reviews before purchasing—and I fell down half a flight of stairs at a ramen place. It wasn't one of those falls where you spring up and look to see if anyone saw it. I knew everyone had.

And now there is the virus.

A COUPLE of weeks into the pandemic, I ran into the kid with the skateboard. His grandmother lives a block away from me. Darnell—Nell—is 24 and has a fighter's face, with brows pulled down at the outer corners and a slight underbite, but his nature is sweet, that of someone who brings medications to his grandmother in the afternoon.

He thought the idea that we're "essential critical infrastructure workers" was B.S.—"they just need someone to bring them their food"—but felt lucky to have work, and this work in particular. "A 9-to-5 would have you in an office, in a kitchen. It's so beautiful to have your freedom."

He appreciated that the apps he rides for had bumped up pay, but he wasn't counting on the new compensation policies they'd promised to cover illness. He'd seen the virus coming and put money away, and he'd changed up his routine.

"I'm barely moving my hands from this vicinity"—he demarcated a space in front of his torso. "I don't touch my hood! When I'm done delivering, everything I have on is washed. I clean out my delivery bag. Every. Day." When he found himself wiping down the door handle at a condo building with disinfectant, he worried he'd gotten obsessive—"people are losing themselves to being scared."

He's double-shampooing his hair now. He pulled a long strand from under his Raiders hoodie, which was enormous over his braids.

Darcy Courteau is a writer and photographer based in Washington, D.C., and Arkansas.

VII.

THE LAST NIGHT OUT

The virus pulled back the curtain on our fraught relationships.

By Calvin Baker

The last night I went out in the city was in late February. I met my friend Grant (whose name has been changed) at the Standard, on Bowery, and we walked over to Bohemian, on Great Jones, to celebrate the 50th birthday of a Broadway producer. After dinner we went down the street to Acme, where a tech entrepreneur was having a dance party to celebrate his 40th. Grant sipped his tequila and began to grow irate because there were so few people of color around. It felt like the 1950s. We were talking to a beautiful Ghanaian woman whom I'd met once before, and when she mentioned a house party in Harlem that a mutual acquaintance was throwing, Grant and I invited ourselves. But as we glided up the FDR we heard the party was a bust. We dropped her off at home and headed to Koreatown, as though we knew it would be one of the last nights we could go out. We ended up in a bar on 34th Street, giving each other the kind of questionable advice that pours out after midnight, when Grant started to thumb at one of his phones.

"It's Fan," he said. (Her name has also been changed.) "She's been under strict quarantine for a month now, and is getting bored." I shot him a skeptical look as they began to have a text war. They had one of those relationships that reminds you the root of passion is suffering. His parents were immigrants from Taiwan, and he believed he could only ever be happy with an Asian woman. I wasn't sure I believed him. She wasn't always as nice to him as she could be. He spoke of his own failings, explained that the friction between them was cultural, and insisted I'd never understand. When he visited China he felt seen, and free of the constant weight of race. I couldn't argue with that, so I shrugged the way you do when a friend in whom you have faith is navigating something complicated. He told me that weeks in isolation give you time to reflect. "With all that's going on, though, who knows when I'll see her." Neither of us knew we would also go into isolation soon. But before the skylarking ended he told me he'd heard that the official numbers in China were underreported: "They say there were five crematoriums burning around the clock."

In the United States, the virus was still mostly centered on the West Coast then, but when I spoke with Grant a few days later he told me three cabs had passed him as he was trying to get

A resident of Bed-Stuy, Brooklyn, on April 4. The man's two brothers had tested positive for the coronavirus in another borough.

to a meeting. "I've seen it happen to my college roommate. I've just never experienced it directly," he said. "Even an Asian guy looked into my face and kept going." I wanted to say maybe the cabbie knew about his girlfriend in Sichuan province, but thought better of it. He was still in pain from the affront. Both Grant and his former roommate, who is African American, are Ivy League lawyers, held in high regard by corporate chiefs and presidents. They thought being brilliant, ethical, and successful would protect them. But no matter who you were, or what you had achieved, it could all collapse at any time into race.

Grant's parents came to America after World War II, part of the second significant wave of Chinese immigration, driven by the new spirit of global cooperation. The first wave had been more than a century earlier, during the California gold rush of the 1850s. But in 1882 Congress passed a law ending further immigration of laborers from China, and the Supreme Court upheld it in 1889. Yet just three years before that, the justices had ruled in *Yick Wo v. Hopkins* that the Chinese people already here, citizens or not, were entitled to equal protection under the Fourteenth Amendment. At the same time, the Court was engaged in a series of rulings that stripped Fourteenth Amendment rights from the people for whom it had been enacted in the first place: formerly enslaved African Americans. In *Plessy v. Ferguson*, Justice John Marshall Harlan referenced the *Wo* decision in his famous dissent, in which he wrote:

> There is a race so different from our own that we do not permit those belonging to it to become citizens of the United States. Persons belonging to it are, with few exceptions, absolutely excluded from our country. I allude to the Chinese race. But by the statute in question, a Chinaman can ride in the same passenger coach with white citizens of the United States, while citizens of the black race [cannot].

The messages are more mixed than those in a fraught relationship—sometimes you're a vile threat; other times you are useful.

Between 1948, when President Harry Truman integrated the armed forces, and 1964, when President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act into law, the legal protections that had been ripped away from African Americans post-Reconstruction were slowly restored. That changed with the election of Richard Nixon in 1968: The re-embrace of racist policy began, and white grievance became a core tenet of the Republican Party, culminating in the 2016 election of Donald Trump. By the logic of the radical extremism our current president represents, a global pandemic that began in a province of China was called the "Chinese virus." Rhode Island sought to bar New Yorkers. Gun sales around

PHOTOGRAPH BY RUDDY ROYE

the country skyrocketed. My friend was snubbed by taxi drivers, even though the vectors of disease were not Asian Americans but the conditions of global existence. With breathtaking swiftness, he lost his individual status, as well as the group status of model minority (always a muddy buffer between whiteness and the continuing oppression of African Americans). The sense of belonging and accomplishment had been doled out and revoked according to the perceptions and needs of whiteness—a bait and switch that Arab Americans know all too well. This was merely the beginning of the ways the pandemic continues to expose the racism beneath the facade of American diversity and exceptionalism.

In the days before the quarantine I did what everyone else was doing: I bought face masks, hand sanitizer, food. I called family and friends around the world. I heard from a friend in California whose brother works at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. She told me he'd said not to worry. Two days later he told her that was only the official line. A friend in Spain wrote, saying: "I'm afraid." Someone mailed me a thermometer. Buying one had become impossible. I took my temperature three times a day. I called my mother, who was alone on her birthday, only to be met with reproach after I chided her for going to the grocery store. She needed ingredients to make herself something special, couldn't I understand? I got into an argument with my oldest friend, the kind of friend you've been arguing politics with since before you could vote, when he said that we'd beat this soon—"Come on, Cal," he said, "we're Americans."

I'd never thought very deeply about universal health care or a universal basic income until I saw the people who had inveighed against it anxiously awaiting the stimulus package, and cheering when the government saved Wall Street. I saw what was possible when there was something people really wanted to accomplish. Billionaires and celebrities made ostentatious displays of their concern. But it was plain to see that some problems are so large, only a government can solve them—in fact, is designed to solve them. Transportation, war, poverty, education, public health.

A friend of a friend was intubated. A classmate was assigned to an ER in a part of Brooklyn where people weren't practicing social distancing. Another was running the COVID-19 unit at a hospital uptown. A third, usually an ice-cold bastard, broke down in tears on the way home from work. We were told there would be no difference in the ways medical care was allocated. People in medical circles were using the word *apocalypse*. But what happens before you get to the hospital?

A friend of a friend was intubated. A classmate was assigned to an ER in a part of Brooklyn where people weren't practicing social distancing. Another, usually an ice-cold bastard, broke down in tears on his way home from work.

By early April, it was well established that black people across the country were dying from the disease at about twice the rate of white people. As New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio noted, there is "a striking overlap of where this virus is doing the most damage and where we've had historic health-care disparities." The situation is much the same in Latino and Native American communities. "We could get wiped out," the CEO of the National Congress of American Indians, Kevin Allis, said. The virus doesn't discriminate, but the world we occupy does. In addition to the damage wrought by environmental pollution—higher in communities of color—and discrepancies in quality of care, there is also the stress of racism on the black body, most obviously manifest in the greater frequency of conditions such as high blood pressure. Even in normal times, black people's life expectancy is more than three years lower than white people's.

I debated for weeks whether to leave the city—looking for places that had good hospitals *and* where I'd be socially comfortable—before finally deciding to stay. "You can't outrun a virus," I replied to an ex, who had reached out to me from another country, recalling how things were after 9/11. In those days, I would wake early and read Marcus Aurelius before taking long walks next to the river at sunrise, thinking about the first Dutch settlement, the English takeover, the British campaign to hold the city during the Revolutionary War, and the market at the foot of Wall Street where Africans and Native Americans were sold. The ways the country changes and the ways it never seems to. You know how the mind wanders at that hour. Staring down at the streets of Brooklyn now, I think less about the plague and the 1918 flu than smallpox-infected blankets knowingly given to Native Americans; the syphilis transmitted by Europeans into a population that had never encountered the disease before; the yellow-fever epidemics of the 18th and 19th centuries that spread, port to port, from the Caribbean, like a florescent trace mark of the economics of slavery; and the malaria-ridden swamps where Africans died by the boatload to produce cotton, rice, and sugar. Homegrown tragedies for a nation that is as frail as it has ever been, and has still less care for the world.

Calvin Baker is a novelist and the author of A More Perfect Reunion: Race, Integration, and the Future of America*, out this month.*

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ODE

to

RUNNING IN THE MOVIES

By James Parker

Dash into the flames.

Come windmilling, widemouthed, out of the collapsing ice palace. Fling yourself at the spiky green shins of the monster. Outpace the avalanche. Running in movies is always toward danger or away from it. No one in movies is ever just *running*.

And like ballet dancers, the great runners in movies express character through movement, through the whirling and thumping of their limbs. Matt Damon, as Jason Bourne, is a brain-wiped super-soldier having an identity crisis, so he runs like a frightened washing machine. Carrie-Anne Moss, as Trinity in *The Matrix*, runs like an equation from the future—which is what she is. Harrison Ford in his prime had a distinctive bowled-over running style: Look at him in *The Fugitive*, blundering and floundering and grimacing and reeling, an everyman dislodged—as if by an explosion—from the everyday, knocked out of his life, and frowningly, head-buttingly determined to get back in there.

(Tom Cruise is different. Whatever part he's playing, Jerry Maguire or Jack Reacher, he runs like Tom Cruise, with piston knees and piston elbows and the face of an angry Christ. And that's okay.)

Bradley Cooper in *Silver Linings Playbook*, pounding around the burbs with a garbage bag sort of medievally layered over his hoodie, is jogging. People do jog in movies, for fitness—but *interiorly*, as they jog along, they're still firmly located on that into-trouble/out-of-trouble axis. They're still going one way or the other. Cooper is running—so he hopes—away from madness.

We are especially close to the joggers in movies, perhaps because jogging is something we can do. We can each of us—knees and hearts allowing—dramatize our personal character arc with jogging. And right now, jogging is about all we've got. Up the hill, round the pond, down the quiet street … We're keeping fit. Boosting our immunity. Regulating our brain waves, flattening the curve—the other one, the one that bellies downward into dissolution and despair.

But there's a creeping pointlessness to it, and a creeping smallness: the privately pulsing heart, the tiny agenda of betterment. It's so pre-pandemic. What to do, then? You can't run at a virus, and you can't run away from one. You can neither storm to victory nor find an entirely safe place. So give yourself a break—let the couch exhale, like a prizefighter taking one to the kidneys, as you land on it—and enjoy a session watching your favorite runner-in-movies. It could be Franka Potente in *Run Lola Run*; it could be Sylvester Stallone, heaving piously up the steps of the Philadelphia Museum of Art. For me, it's got to be Daniel Day-Lewis as Hawkeye in *The Last of the Mohicans*.

If you've seen the movie, he's in your head right now—a swooping, swerving, low-shouldered, soft-footed runner, moving through the woods, moving through his element. He is fluid; he is fierce; sometimes he has a loaded musket in each hand. An enemy rears up, he drops him without pausing, and he doesn't look back. *A*

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